THE STUBBORN HEART

FRANK G. SLAUGHTER

The Stubborn Heart

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Oh, de grubbin'-hoe's a restin' in de co'nah,
An' de plow's a tumblin' down in de fiel',
While de whippo'will's a-wailin' lak a mou'nah,
When his stubborn heart is tryin' hard to yiel'.

PAUL DUNBAR

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I

The Fever

i

THE HOUSE stood on its man-made hill, serene as a Greek temple. Tonight its proud white portico was empty as the portal of a tomb. Yet the house seemed curiously alive, endowed with a vitality all its own. Even the casual visitor would have sensed that vitality instantly. Chisholm Hundred had been built to endure: this soaring portico and warm red brick enclosed a vision sturdier than the heartbeat of man.

Like the house, the Chisholm land had the same air of aloofness from the world without. To the east, its avenue of live oaks (deep-mossed, and graceful as a file of Spanish dons) marched ruler-straight to meet the Wilmington pike and the twin gateposts that marked the boundary of the estate. On the waterside, the land dropped in a series of terraces to join the river at a private landing stage. But the Chisholm earth was a thing apart. Like the great house itself and the pattern of outbuildings clustered in its shadow, this earth was strangely alive tonight—alive and withdrawn and waiting. Secure in its own aura, Chisholm Hundred lay serene in the moonlight, ignoring the challenge of a new day.

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Since he had come to man's estate the east bedroom had been Julian Chisholm's special preserve. Tonight he reveled in that private heaven as never before. This, he told himself anxiously, might be the last happy moment he would know at Chisholm Hundred: tonight, along with the society of Wilmington and the Cape Fear Valley, he

would be meeting Mark's bride. Obviously it was an occasion when a younger brother (fresh from his medical course at the university) must look his best.

At a moment such as this one's mind dwelt lovingly on details. Old Walter, the estate's mulatto barber, had labored for an hour to make his tight cap of curls a thing of classic perfection: his sideburns would not have disgraced a Western desperado. Now, completely dressed and ready to answer the call of the violins downstairs, he could relax in his favorite armchair and let Prince, his personal houseboy, give a final gloss to his dancing pumps. Lazy as a contented cat, he could even smile a little while he watched the young Negro kneel to his work and heard the chamois shoe cloth snap in those dark hands like a taut banjo string.

As always, his bedroom held its own enchantment. A gay aristocrat among rooms, it was hardly less magnificent than his brother's quarters—or the master suite that Mark would share with Lucy when they returned from their wedding tour. Above the glass curtains at the windows lambrequins flared like royal crowns. The blue-and-gold flower pattern of the wallpaper brought back Paris, intact. Under the toe of his dancing pump the deep, peach-bloom carpet was delicate as a woman's caress.

Prince rose from his final polish and turned the pier glass in the armoire door so that his master could check his work without rising from his chair. Julian Chisholm nodded his approval. He blended with the room tonight, with all the room symbolized. His tight-strapped doeskins were a deep midnight blue—a pleasant contrast for the claw hammer of maroon velvet with its flaring satin revers, the foam of lace at breast and throat. . . . Downstairs the violins sang on, and he rose to their summons. But he lingered a moment more while Prince poured a *fine champagne* at the cellaret—the bracer young gentlemen in the Carolinas deemed essential between an afternoon's riding and an evening of dalliance to the music of Lanner and Strauss. The houseboy's bow, as the hall door swung wide, was reverence itself.

Lucy was waiting down there, in that medley of belled skirts and soaring waltz tune. But he never reached the stair well. . . . Lucy had already whirled into his arms in waltz time; a cotton-wool darkness closed in, shutting out the whole world as their mouths met and

clung. Mark was shut out with the others, though he heard his brother cry out just once before the blackness claimed him. . . . *Or was it his own voice that cried out in the heart of his dream?*

A light exploded in his brain, and he was staring wide awake in the four-poster bed, sweating in the bath of moonlight that poured through the open window. It was still his bedroom at Chisholm Hundred. He knew that much instantly, just as he knew that Mark was dead and Lucy far away. But the cool hand that soothed his forehead was strange to him.

Then he felt the woman's eyes as they continued to study him intently above the candle flame. And he knew that this was his wife. The wife who had been his nurse all through his bout with fever—who slept in the room across the hall now that the long illness was ending.

"Another nightmare?" Her lips barely whispered the words. He nodded mutely, avoiding her eyes. *How long had he cowered here, after dreams such as these, without daring to meet this woman's eyes?*

"Forgive me if I—wakened you."

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Lie quietly, Julian. You're—quite well now. They said you could get up tomorrow—remember?"

"It's tomorrow now," he said. "And I'll never be well again." *Her name was Jane Anderson. Or rather, she had been Jane Anderson. She was Jane Chisholm now, the mistress of Chisholm Hundred. Why could he never quite force his lips to shape her name?*

"You'll see, darling," she said. "Just lie quietly. Try to sleep again."

The cool hand vanished into darkness, and strangely as it had come. Without turning he heard the whisper of a robe on the floor, knew that the hall door had closed. For a long while he lay rigid in the bed, holding thought at arm's length. When he slept again his sleep was dreamless. When he dared to open his eyes his brain was clear as a winter bell.

Mist boiled thickly outside the windows that opened at the eastern end of the portico, between two pillars heavy with a carving of acanthus leaves. The windows stood wide, for the heat of summer lay heavy on the land, even in this hour of dawn. At the moment the mist twined in long tendrils among the columns, hiding both river and plantation from his view. But the gray light that filled the room was merciless. He closed his eyes against the revelation. He could

almost wish that the fog of fever would return to blot out this waking nightmare.

Save for the four-poster where he lay, the huge room was bare as poverty's bones. The leaded windows, minus half their panes, gaped in frames innocent of curtains or drapes. Craters in the plaster showed where the lambrequins had once spread their golden crowns; a few shards of glass curtains, whispering feebly in the dawn wind from the river, were all that remained to bring back the older time. The drum-shaped mahogany cellaret was gone. The armoire, where a battalion of London-tailored coats had once stood at attention, was stripped of its last boot tree, the pier glass cracked and clouded.

Even the bed where he lay had changed—and his weary body resented that discomfort most of all. The embroidered tester had vanished: the four slender poles thrust their naked points at a rain-streaked ceiling. As he turned to bury his face in the pillow he heard the rustle of cornhusks beneath him, felt the bite of the rope webbing that had replaced the deep comfort of an imported box spring.

The thumbprint of Mars, he thought. War's inevitable aftermath, heavy on a conquered land. On Chisholm Hundred and the rich earth that made it. On its owner's brain, his will to live. Perhaps if he burrowed deeper in this cornhusk lair he could find Lucy again. . . .

When he wakened in earnest hot sunlight had burned away the mist and spread its cheerful patina cross the ancient crazy quilt that served as his only cover. For a while he let his fingers play with the faded pattern of the quilt before he permitted his eyes to move on to the object folded neatly across the splintered blanket rail. It was an army greatcoat in field gray. The canary-yellow cuffs had turned green from years of use; the officer's tabs at the collar were tarnished beyond repair. . . . *His* greatcoat, worn since Vicksburg. His shelter in a hundred rainy fields, his blanket in a Union prison pen. The frayed reminder that Captain Chisholm (whilom doctor in the Army of the Confederate States of America) had served a foredoomed cause, not without honor.

Obeying an impulse he could not define, he thrust a foot forward and sent the tattered garment tumbling to the floor. At that same moment the hall door swung wide, and he cowered back to his pillow, pretending to sleep. It was a ruse he had used often of late when his wife invaded his bedroom.

Today he could observe her almost calmly through his craftily lowered lids. He could even admire the cool beauty of her carriage and the way she had twisted her copper-dark hair above her forehead, in a prodigal coronet braid. It was a fine forehead, for all its deep tan. Her arms and throat were tanned as well, down to the lacings of her simple cotton house dress. He could not see her eyes. Like himself, she kept them averted as she put porridge and coffee on a table beside the bed.

"Eat your breakfast, Julian, before it gets cold."

She had spoken gently, as a mother might address a well-loved and not-quite-forgiven child. He kept his eyes closed, knowing the reason for that tone. Once more he waited in vain for some surge of feeling to bring back the past they had shared, to make it real again. . . .

God knew that he was grateful to this tall, handsome girl who had once been Jane Anderson and was now Jane Chisholm. Grateful as a beaten animal is grateful to the hand that now gives it food and shelter. Try as he might, he could establish no human point of contact. He could only wait tensely beneath the crazy quilt until he was alone again.

Her hand smoothed the lank hair at his temples. He guessed that her eyes were brimming, though she kept her voice impersonal.

"It's another fine morning, darling."

"Is it, really?"

"I know you're awake. We all know you're well. You can't lie here forever."

Even when she had gone he did not stir for a while—though he was certain now that there would be no more visitors until the doctor came. Then he flung the crazy quilt aside at last and slapped a bare foot on the floor. Once he was on his feet, he found he could stare at the bed with real loathing. Once a slight dizziness had passed, it seemed incredible that he had cowered there so long—the victim of a mental illness far more deadly than malaria. Or that he had permitted that dream of Lucy to rise between him and his wife like an evil phantom.

He paced the question out awhile, a gaunt figure in a cambric nightshirt, his long hair wild as some forgotten bird's nest. Each time he passed the clouded mirror in the armoire he was appalled at what he saw. A ragpicker, he thought, would have more pride than this. . . .

But then it was always easy to curse Lucy's memory in the bright light of day, to insist he had put that sultry bitch behind him, finally and forever.

And yet Lucy had been a part of Chisholm Hundred once in a way that Jane could never be.

A light breeze stirred in the sycamore just outside his corner window—or the spot where a window had once opened: it belled the gunny sack that now covered the cannon-splintered wall. For a long moment he stared out at the sweep of weed-choked fields that marched gauntly to the horizon. Fields that should be green with cotton plants today, though not even a scarecrow stood among the raddled furrows.

He forced himself to go on staring, to drink his cup of bitterness to the full, until the wind died and the falling crokersack blotted out the view. Then, feeling the tears start to his eyes, he bolted to the bed—and lay there, rigid with dread, to await the arrival of Dr. Louis Rothschild.

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Louis said, "We could have talked a week ago, Julian. Or even earlier. Of course you've been a very sick man——"

"Go on, please. I'm prepared to hear everything now."

The doctor stirred in the chair he had pulled up to the bedside. Louis had been a classmate of Julian's in Glasgow; they had done obstetrics together at the Hôtel-Dieu and dissected in the clinics of Budapest under Semmelweis. Though their paths had crossed but briefly in the war, they were friends of long standing. Julian wondered why the slender Jewish doctor should seem ill at ease this morning. After all, he thought, I'm not the first fever case you've mended.

"Let's be honest, Julian. You can't blame me for wondering just how much you're prepared to hear."

"Try me."

"Your amnesia," said Louis, "was only partial at its worst——"

"So that's what you're calling it?"

"Partial loss of memory," said the other. "Induced by fever and overwork. But you recognized me weeks ago. You remembered Noah

Heath. And, though you've yet to speak her name aloud, you know your wife——"

"Go on, please. Why do you hesitate?"

"In cases of this sort—as you know—we begin by asking the patient certain questions, to determine the extent of his recovery."

"I'm quite well, I assure you."

"Can you name the day and date?"

"Of course not. It was April when I fell ill. April '65. Richmond had fallen some days ago. We were on our way home——"

"It is now August," said Louis Rothschild. "To be exact, August 22, 1865." He smiled at Julian, but his eyes were grave. "Can you tell me where you are?"

"Certainly. In my own bedroom at Chisholm Hundred——"

"And the location?"

"The Cape Fear River. Eight miles below Wilmington, North Carolina."

"Excellent, Julian. I can remember when you insisted that this was a house in Georgia——"

"High Cedars?"

"High Cedars," said Louis. "Union underground headquarters outside Atlanta for escaped prisoners from Andersonville. Jane's headquarters—and mine. It was rash of you to come there after Chickamauga, Julian. Rash but natural. Are you still remembering?"

Julian closed his eyes and let his friend's voice flow on, unchecked. At the moment he was too shocked by the day and date to follow Louis clearly. August 1865. So he had tossed on this cornshuck mattress for sixteen weeks or more. No wonder the wind still sighed at his broken walls. No wonder his fields had gone back to brush.

"It was a bad wound you brought to High Cedars, Julian. You came near dying in *that* bed too. But we nursed you back to health——" Louis broke off and put a hand on Julian's arm. "Try the rest aloud. You'll find it helps."

"Are you asking me to admit that my wife was a Union agent working in the South? I married her with my eyes open wide. I can say it without shuddering. She had every right to—to help escaped prisoners. I made no effort to stop her——"

But it was coming back in a rush now. How he had learned of Jane's presence at High Cedars by merest chance. How he had forced him-

self to keep clear for her sake. Until he had been bundled into that hospital train and shipped to Atlanta. Then (as his mind clouded with fever) it had seemed only logical to murmur his wife's address as the hospital buckboard rattled into Peachtree Street. . . .

"She knew I never meant to interfere. After all, she left Georgia in time. Yes, and came through the war without a scratch." Louis had been right: he was much calmer now he had brought his dilemma into the open. "Many of us ended the war on different sides. Why should I hold it against her?"

"But you do," said Louis. "Or rather, you did—while your fever lasted. Try a little more. Where did you marry Jane?"

"At sea off Scotland. In the fall of '62. I'd finished my medical work abroad. I was penniless at the moment—and eager to get into the war. So was *she*—for other reasons——"

"Don't let it die," said Louis. "You're doing wonderfully now."

"We struck a bargain. She gave me passage money. I gave her my name. It seemed quite a lark at the time——"

"You might be a bit more precise. You married Jane to escape another woman."

"Who told you that?"

"*You* did—when the fever was at its crisis."

"Does she know too?"

Louis shrugged. "I imagine there's very little about you that Jane doesn't know. The lady's name is Lucy Sprague. Once your brother's wife. Later the widow of Victor Sprague, a Yankee bigwig. You saw Mrs. Sprague in New York during the war. At the time you felt you'd lived your infatuation down. You were sure of it when the war ended and you found Jane again in Richmond. So sure that you asked your wife to—become your wife again, in every sense. To return with you to Chisholm Hundred. To help you rebuild your home and your fortunes. Have I stated the case fairly so far?"

"Perfectly. I even know why you're in the picture. You and this Negro Heath——"

Dr. Rothschild smiled wanly. "Dr. Noah Heath and I are—how shall I say?—social-minded. Enough, at least, to give up a good practice in New York and come South. You see, we've always wanted to experiment with clinic work on a large plantation. We're doing just that at Chisholm Hundred—with your consent and Jane's."

"With my consent?"

"Have you forgotten you promised me as much when you lay ill at High Cedars?"

"It hardly matters, Louis. You must realize you're welcome."

"And Noah too?"

"As your assistant, yes."

"Believe me, we haven't worn our welcome out. Doctors have been needed here since the surrender. And if I do say it, we've a first-rate hospital in the old slave quarters."

"Whom do you treat?"

"The Confederate Army is still straggling home. There's been guerrilla fighting in the back country. If it weren't for an epidemic of putrid fever in the Hollow, I'd say that our surgery has been busier than our outpatient ward."

"And what on earth is the Hollow?"

"Some of the whites hereabouts call it Lincolnville," said Louis. "Or Scalawag Heaven. It's a shanty camp in the middle of Twelve-Mile Swamp. Built by ex-slaves from three counties. You've much to catch up on, Julian."

"And my slaves? Who has cared for *them*?"

Again Louis Rothschild looked mildly shocked. "Jane's done what she could to coax them back to the estate. But they're still hard to find. When she brought you here there weren't more than a dozen Negroes on the place. Barricaded in this house, with your Scotch overseer in command. Or do you remember that much?"

"I've no memory of arriving here. The last clear picture is a raft on a river—and men in homespuns. Men with long-barreled rifles. Bushwhackers, who took orders from—my wife." He closed his eyes on that image, forcing his voice to continue. "It was the Cape Fear River. Below Fayetteville. We'd come that way after we rode down from Richmond——"

"Those were the same bushwhackers who guarded High Cedars," said Louis. "Mountain men, for the most part—from Jane's county in Tennessee. Amos Martin was their leader—then and now. Surely you remember Jud and Clint and Lafe——"

"Amos was my wife's cousin. I remember that. Surely they aren't needed here?"

"They cleared your land of squatters—and held it for you at rifle

point. These are bad times, Julian. They'll be worse before they mend."

"I'm aware of that, Louis."

"Then you should thank God for Jane—and for those rifles from Tennessee. They've done more than you'll ever know to keep what's yours—and hers."

"You needn't continue the lecture. I remember everything now."

Louis struck his palms together briskly. "Prove it then. Be the man Jane married. Get up from those cornhusks and start fighting."

"Are you giving me orders in my own house?"

"As your doctor, yes."

Their eyes clashed—and Julian's were the first to drop. "Doctors should cure their patients."

"You must cure yourself this time. There's a wall in you, Julian. God knows who put it there or why. But it's shutting you off from Jane. For weeks now it's shut you off from life itself. And only you can break it down."

"You might give me some help."

Louis Rothschild walked to the cannon gash in the west side of the bedroom. Raising one fist, he hammered at the loose masonry, sending a cloud of brick dust spouting in the morning breeze. "It could be *this*, my friend."

"Chisholm Hundred?"

"This house. Hate for the enemy that all but ruined it. Love for the land he's conquered. Hate and love can be a strong poison if they're badly mixed."

He left the room quickly, without looking back, pulling the hall door shut behind him.

iv

The whorl of brick dust still hung in the crater of the west wall as the crokersack rose and fell in the lazy morning breeze. Julian Chisholm, hugging his knees in the welter of his bed, breathed in the odor absently, letting his mind fumble with Louis's last words.

Love for one's land. Hate for the enemy who has conquered it.

Louis was painfully right, of course. Blended in that fashion, they could make a deadly poison indeed. Especially if it invaded a man's brain when that brain still reeled from illness.

It was curious that his love for Chisholm earth should have this late flowering. In his father's time he had turned his back on this house—and all it stood for: first, to pursue the science of healing abroad, later to plunge deep in the mad fulfillment that was Lucy Sprague. It had been easy to take the estate for granted when it was self-contained and self-sufficient. Now that the land cried out for help (in a voice he could all but hear) he knew that he had loved it always.

In another moment, he told himself, I'll be ready to rise from this bed again, to get to work in earnest. His hand moved to the bell pull —until he remembered that Prince had gone to war with Harrison Chisholm and had suffered the old master's fate. Surely this gutted ruin must count a houseboy among the luxuries of the past. But his hand had already completed the gesture—hardly surprised to find the bell pull in its place, though the raucous clang in the hall outside was a poor echo of the chime he remembered.

The door swung open almost instantly on a soft-eyed Negro who might have been Prince's double, though this Negro stood proudly erect and wore neat white twill in place of the Chisholm livery. Julian choked off his order just in time. This, he knew, was Louis Rothschild's partner—Noah Heath, the New York surgeon with degrees from abroad and a skill with the scalpel that matched his own.

"Good morning, Doctor. I'm glad to see you're better." The Negro's bow, when it came, was a deference offered to an equal, nothing more. The Negro's accent, devoid of the consonantal slurring of the South, was doubly strange under this roof.

"I didn't ring for you, Dr. Heath. I'd hoped that one of my house slaves——" Julian swallowed the rest in confusion, forcing himself to meet Heath's smile with a hard-eyed stare.

"There are no house slaves on the estate at present. The house slaves were the first to go. Your butler returned last month, and old Martha has been in the kitchen for some time. But your father's papers show that they were given their freedom years ago." Heath's tone was dispassionate. He might be discussing a routine problem in management, thought Julian. Never the destruction of my universe.

"I'm aware of Roy's status—and Martha's," he said stiffly. "Will you send Roy to me now?"

"Both of them are in the fields, Doctor. We need all the hands we can spare these days——"

I'm aware of that too, raged Julian inwardly. I know that this whole estate would be a nest of squatters if it weren't for Jane. What right have you to remind me?

Aloud he said only, "Was this my wife's doing?"

"Jane also left orders for their recall in case you wanted a real breakfast." Heath looked at the untasted porridge on the night table. Try as he might, Julian could not hate him too successfully, despite the Negro's casual use of his wife's name.

"Please call them back, then. I'll be downstairs in a half-hour. And I'll talk with Mrs. Chisholm now if she's about. Or is she in the fields with the others?"

"Jane is at the clinic with Louise. I *hoped* that was why you rang."

"Will you say I await her pleasure?"

"I will indeed. Wouldn't you care to dress first? You'll find a wardrobe of sorts in this armoire."

"It sounds an excellent idea."

"I'll stay and help if you like."

"Thank you, no. I'll manage alone."

"As you wish, Doctor." Heath was already in the doorway. "I realize that I've startled you a bit. Don't let that trouble you—we'll grow used to one another in time."

The Negro closed the hall door softly. You may have the last word today, thought Julian. It doesn't trouble me to find that you were assigned to watch my door.

He flung off the crazy quilt in his anger and charged his armoire door, knowing in advance what he would find. Knowing, just as surely, that the linen duster coat, the whipcord trousers, and knee-length riding boots had been waiting in that corner for weeks—too homespun to look forlorn there in the vast emptiness of a once regal clothespress.

When he had pulled on the boots and tried the wide-brimmed planter's hat for size, he saw from the pier glass that he resembled his father's overseer far more than the new master of the estate. The lank

hair and the blaze of anger in the eyes went with that hand-me-down image. I could pass for a poor white, he thought. An upcountry redneck, hungry for a job and a kind word. . . .

This, however, was no moment for staring at a scarecrow in a clouded mirror. This was his last chance to sort his memories of one Mrs. Kirby Anderson, who had been born Jane Randall of Tennessee. A poor white who had not hesitated to mate with two Southern nabobs—and had used both as she saw fit.

Yet he had never questioned Jane's motives where he was concerned. He grinned wanly at the scarecrow in the mirror as the picture came back, complete with romantic trappings. The ancient clipper westbound from Glasgow. The marriage on the salt-wet deck, with a drunken skipper for dominie and a gambler for best man. A union of convenience—the mysterious widow who had needed a husband for her return to a land at war; the reckless young surgeon, still heartsick from a hopeless passion, who had needed passage money just as badly.

There had been no love lost between them at that moment. Love had grown later, as they met and parted and met again in the crucible of war. Had he loved her for her courage, her stubborn choice of loyalties? Or had he only been grateful that she could drive out his yearning for Lucy—at least for a time?

Fighting for an answer, he strode to his window. It seemed quite logical that Jane should be crossing the lawn at this precise moment, with Noah Heath beside her. She was still wearing her cotton dress—a strange garb for a lady, he thought absently. In the full sunlight the tan at her arms and throat all but matched the color of her tight-braided hair. She looked alert, strong-limbed, utterly at home. When she lifted her chin it shocked him still more to find she was even lovelier than he had dared remember.

He drew back as Jane and the Negro doctor glanced up at his window. But he knew they had shaken hands solemnly before Jane marched toward the main portal of the house. The fellow is wishing her luck, he thought. Damn him, what right has he to take her hand?

With a great effort he kept clear of the usual asylum of the bed when he heard her knock. While she was nursing me, he thought wanly, she entered this room at will. Why must she ask permission now?

"Come in," he all but shouted—and cursed the tremor in his voice.

He was facing her like an officer on parade as she entered quietly, paused for a moment with her back against the half-closed door, and lifted her eyes to his.

"Good morning, dear."

"Good morning, Jane." He had spoken her name aloud—for the first time in Chisholm Hundred. His voice felt taut as a rusty wire.

"It's good to see you're up."

"It's good to *be* up."

So far, he thought, we're talking with our teeth. I suppose we must make a beginning, no matter how. "You might sit down—Jane," he said, forcing her name with another effort. "You might even smile."

"I've been smiling for a long time, Julian," she said. "It's your turn now."

He forced a grimace of sorts while he fumbled with the broken-back rocker in the corner—the only visible chair. Even as he offered it with a mechanical bow he found time to wonder where they had salvaged this miserable relic. "We've a great deal to catch up on, it seems."

"A great deal, I'm afraid."

"That's my fault," he said. "I know my illness was—more than a fever. Will that do for a start?"

"Don't blame yourself too much, Julian. I know what you've been through——"

"How could you?"

He drew back aghast, for he had all but shouted the question. But Jane's tranquil mask was intact.

"I was your nurse. I'm your wife."

He turned away from her, fighting for calm. "You needn't prompt me. I remember everything now. Right up to that moment in Fayetteville—when I fell from my saddle. Amos Martin carried me to a raft. There was a litter, and blankets. There must have been quinine—I remember its taste. Were you my nurse even then?"

"Even then, Julian. Amos and the others brought us here——"

"It must be a strange occupation," he said. "Waiting for your husband to return from limbo——"

"I've kept busy."

"So Louis tells me."

We're still talking with our teeth, he thought. Naturally she'd only

draw back if I tried to be—tender. He made the effort, regardless. "I'm sorry, Jane. Truly sorry. Or doesn't that help either?"

"You might prove it," she said. "You might endorse what I've done so far."

"Give me an account of your stewardship. Louis didn't tell me everything."

This time, he felt, her smile went deeper than her lips. "He told you about the hospital, at least."

"I'll admit I was a bit startled."

"It takes a long time to break up a defeated army. Longer still for a sick soldier to find himself."

"I should know that better than most."

"Then you'll hardly begrudge us our hospital ward. Surely it's our duty to help all we can."

"You used the slave quarters," he said dully.

"They were in ruins when we came here. We're planning to build homes for our Negroes—those we can lure back."

"Where?"

"On the ridge behind the house—where they'll get sun and air."

He smiled wryly as he pictured that portion of the estate before the war. A rich carpet of green under oaks and crape myrtle. A wide vista of river and champagne-colored fields ringing the belvedere Lucy had used once as a summerhouse—and their own special rendezvous. It seemed right, in an odd way, that Harrison Chisholm's ex-slaves should settle here—above the house itself, in clean sunlight. . . . And yet, even as his mind accepted the idea, a deeper voice was protesting by rote.

"Negroes have never lived within four hundred yards of the big house, Jane. Slaves or not, I can't change that rule."

He watched the mask go over her eyes—as tangibly as though a film had fallen inside the lids. "You recovered just in time. We'd planned to break ground tomorrow."

"You can build on the riverbank, just beyond the gins."

"Are you sure that's a safe distance?"

"It's a perfect spot for field hands' cabins," he said, ignoring the sarcasm. "My father often thought of moving the quarters there."

"As you will, Julian."

He watched her narrowly, feeling no elation at his small victory. "How many have returned so far?"

"Not more than fifty. They sleep where they can. Under the portico, in the carriage house. Some are camping in the orchard, in army supply wagons——"

"You've put in a crop, then?"

"A small one. Not more than a hundred acres in all. It's the best we could do this year."

"I can believe that."

"It wasn't easy, Julian." Her voice, ice-cold from the beginning, seemed to tremble for the first time. "First of all, I had to outthink the carpetbaggers——"

"Say that again, please."

"It's a label we've put on every scalawag who has come South as a Federal agent."

"They've no right in Carolina."

"Wilmington's swarming with them. You must remember we're a conquered province."

"Mr. Lincoln promised us an honorable peace."

"Don't you even remember that Lincoln is dead?"

He looked at her from haunted eyes. "I suppose that's another fact I've tried to forget."

"Most of the scalawags have flocked to the various inspectors' offices," said Jane. "Fortunately, the commanding general in Wilmington is honest: he's tried to treat landowners fairly, so far. But there's no avoiding the bloodsuckers——"

"Are you telling me that I must account to an outsider for my own planting?"

"Believe me, they count every rasher of bacon—and every egg."

"Do we have eggs to count, then?"

"A few, now. And Macalastair was able to hide some of the stock. Enough mules to plow the south hundred. We've put in some winter cover to feed them." Her voice had gone flat again; he could see that she was holding back deliberately, forcing him to put the questions. "We've even a few work horses in the stable—yes, and a pair of hunters—thanks to that same Scotch overseer."

"What have we used for money?"

"That's been our real problem. I sometimes wonder how we've lasted——"

"Surely you salvaged a little from your first husband's will? As I

recall, you cut quite a swath in Atlanta as Mrs. Anderson. Or did the Yankees pay for that?"

He saw that he had touched her at last and took a perverse pleasure in her blush. "It was Anderson money, every penny. I burned up the last of it when I burned High Cedars." She paused, her breathing stormy. "You know all this, as well as I. Why make me say it?"

"I've been ill, Jane. I must sort the facts——"

"You know I was only a girl when I married Kirby Anderson. And you know I regretted it long before he died. I'll never regret using his money to help the Underground. You were in a Northern prison pen. Can you blame me?"

"Let's try not to quarrel, Jane."

"We're not—yet. If you'll give me a chance I'll tell you where I found the money for Chisholm Hundred."

"I won't interrupt again."

"The money came from your cotton. A hundred bales that Mac ginned during the war. It was rafted downstream at night and hidden in the cave at Bowen's Bluff. We sold it at Wilmington this summer at a dollar a pound."

"In spite of these—carpetbaggers?"

"In spite of everything. That money saved us—while it lasted."

"You've spent it all so soon?"

"Most of it went to make the present crop."

His eyes strayed to the flapping crokersack on the cannon-shattered wall. "You might have used a little to repair the house."

"We did what we could. Stonemasons were out of the question this summer. I felt the land came first——"

"Where did the rest go?"

"Field hands get wages now, Julian."

"Couldn't they wait for wages until the crop is ginned?"

"The Freedman's Bureau won't hear of it. There'd be a scalawag here tomorrow, urging the lot of them to leave——"

"Not if Amos met him with a shotgun."

"I tell you, these agents come and go as they please. With army bayonets behind them. If you so much as protested you'd find yourself in jail."

"And yet you sold my cotton under their noses. How did you get the authority?"

"I'm your wife."

"You said that once."

"Apparently, it bears repeating. Someone had to take charge. You weren't yourself this summer. Louis agreed with me fully. So fully that he certified you as incompetent pro tem."

"Certified me to whom?"

"The commanding general in Wilmington."

"A friend of yours, I gather."

"I knew General Harney during the war." She hesitated, but her glance did not waver. "He gave me legal authority to handle your affairs."

"Until I recovered, of course."

"Of course. I explained that you'd been a noncombatant. And how much our hospital had meant here. How much your medical genius would mean to—to us all in the future."

He had held his temper easily enough; now he let it ride unchecked. "Did you say I sympathized with the Union?"

"I told him that you represented the better element in the South. Men who'd have kept the Union without war if they'd had the chance."

"But I was locked up like a madman while you went on with your plans."

"I tell you there was no other way. And they were not my plans alone. They were yours, too—not so long ago."

"Are you implying that I've changed?"

"No, Julian. It's your universe that has changed while you lay here and dreamed." She broke off and turned away. "Louis will tell you how ill you were, if you won't believe me."

"I believe you."

"You cursed us in your delirium. Me, most of all. You called out for that woman——"

"I was delirious. You know I've lived Lucy down."

"That's another thing you must prove," she said, and walked out with her head high.

He stood alone, feeling his senses quiver under the impact of a reality that all but engulfed him. Facts had been flung at his head today helter-skelter, and all the news was bad. It was an impact no man could bear without staggering. And yet, he thought, I must turn that

doorknob, even if doom is waiting just outside. As master of Chisholm Hundred, I belong to this war-scarred house and the waiting earth. From this moment we live or die together.

He carried the resolve like a shield as he strode into the hall at last and down the great spiral of the stair well.

V

An hour later, seated in the white-and-gold splendor of the dining room, Julian rejoiced that the vandals had been denied this part of the house. With his father's butler pouring coffee he could close his eyes and link past with present—merely by surrendering to the gentle ghosts that peopled this long oval board. Lulled by the opium of remembered plenty, he felt that he could linger here forever.

True, the grave elegance of the room was a bit smudged here and there. The table itself (it had seemed the same at first glance) was a poor, patched thing of yellow pine; the heavy doilies of Sardinian linen on which his service stood had been darned expertly enough. Sideboard and buffet had vanished, along with the huge epergnes that had once spilled over with fruit from the Chisholm orchard, and the galaxy of Rubens nudes on the facing walls. Even the doors that folded out to the hallway sagged on their hinges, for it was here that the tide of destruction had halted at last, then rolled reluctantly backward.

Roy had explained that, too, volubly enough, as he served the young master's breakfast. The Confederate forces, it seemed, had dug in along the turnpike for a last stand, using the house itself as a command post. When Union gunboats had appeared in the river they had surrendered abruptly, perhaps a half-hour after the first shell smashed through the Chisholm roof. Macalastair and a handful of slaves had lived through it all, stamping out fires in the portico, on the very threshold of this dining hall. . . .

"They give up jes' in time, Mist' Julian. All in all, we don't get hurt too bad. You go look at Stedman Knoll. Or the Judge's place on the Bluff——"

"The east wing looks bad enough——"

"Us saved what we could, Mist' Julian."

"Who gutted the bedrooms?"

"Bummers. Old Mist' Mac, he couldn't guard everything. Night after night we take turnabout on the muskets, right at that do'. . . . Blasted 'em away from *this* part. Couldn't save the east wing nohow. Couldn't keep white trash from nestin' there. Not till your lady came —with Amos and the rest."

Sipping his coffee, postponing the moment when he must rise and inspect the estate in earnest, Julian remembered his butler's words gratefully. Roy had paused often in his recital, with eyebrows arched, to make sure that this catalogue of disaster did not spoil the master's appetite. Julian was glad that he had offered a hand to Roy when he first entered the dining room. Obscurely pleased that Roy had almost bent to kiss his ring—and had remembered, at the last instant, that times had changed.

Roy's own hand had been deep-callused after long hours in the fields, and that, in itself, marked a change in status no less violent than the master's own. But the fact that his father's butler had been a freedman before the war could not alter his deep loyalty to the Chisholm clan—nor his joy at the last Chisholm's return.

Julian smiled again as Roy stepped forward to pour a final cup.

"Where's the old mahogany?"

"Lord save us, Mist' Julian, we put this room to the ax that day. Made us a barricade right in that hall. Carpet went the same way—to snuff out fires."

Julian turned the cup in his hand. Part of a Crown Derby service, it had been fired in England a good century ago, its eggshell surface blazoned with the arms that Timothy Chisholm had brought overseas with his King's patent.

"I see you saved the china."

"Us buried it, Mist' Julian. 'Long with the table silver—what we could save. Bummers grabbed the rest."

"We've a great deal to earn back, it seems."

"Us'll earn it. You'll see."

Julian glanced up sharply. Roy had served his family since the beginning: Roy had proffered a generation of morning coffees and brandy nightcaps, with his deference unchanged. This was the first time he had offered sustenance to a flagging spirit.

"How long have you worked in the fields?"

"Since I come out of the Hollow. Miz Chisholm, she pay us all to help make a crop. Miz Chisholm say we got no other way to stay alive —an' she's right."

The master of Chisholm Hundred smiled. Self-confidence, he reflected, is a blessing of freedom that the late Mr. Lincoln had stressed in his famous Proclamation. Roy (freed by his master's order) had every reason to exhibit it now.

"Is Mrs. Chisholm in the fields?"

"No one in the whole house but you an' me. Not unless Mist' Mac come over from his office."

"Then I won't detain you, Roy. You've work to do, and so have I."

But he sat for a long time after the butler had departed. It was quite like Jane to give him a whole morning to pick up her challenge. Even Roy had understood that he must be left alone.

It was too easy, and too dangerous, to bring back the vanished time. . . . Hunt breakfasts roaring around a great oval of mahogany, riotous with scarlet coats and tempers that sometimes flared as brightly. Ritualistic, gala dinners: the air heavy with political thunder, his father's eloquence matched with other weighty voices—while the port made its clockwise circle and the sonatas of Mozart and Beethoven echoed dimly from the drawing room . . . Winter vacation mornings, when that same board was gay with the chatter of schoolmates and a slave stood behind every chair, ready to take instant orders from Roy as the mammoth meal was served. Ham steaks, with an archipelago of eggs afloat in fragrant brown gravy. Roe herrings, fresh from the river, flanked by fried squirrel and rabbit. Filets of steak that could be cut with a fork. Coffee beans from Brazil, ground and brewed at the side table. Cream pitchers where a spoon could stand upright.

For all the glitter of his Crown Derby china, he had breakfasted today on hominy grits and a single egg. His coffee—though Roy had poured it from a Sheffield urn—had been mostly chicory. He knew that the honey and beaten biscuits had been old Martha's one extravagance, to mark the master's full recovery: flour had sold for a thousand Confederate dollars a barrel not too long ago. . . . Jane, with hours of hard work behind her now, would never have ordered biscuits here in their starved corner of the South.

Jane, as usual, was quite right—and he had sat here long enough.

He rose firmly and opened the drawing-room doors. Those tall

portals seemed untouched, their brass knobs larger than a man's two fists, the tented scrollwork above them suggesting the entrance to some oriental temple. He did not pause to note the tarnish on the knobs, nor to count the spider webs that patterned the carvings above.

The splendid Adam mirror that filled the far wall of his drawing room flung back his image, mocking him as an interloper in that overseer's garb even as it welcomed him to his domain. The mirror repeated a well-loved room. The raspberry silk curtains seemed unchanged. So did the pink-and-green medallions on the frivolous wallpaper, the noble cave of a fireplace. So did the portrait of old Timothy, bursting with vitality (and a hint of gout) on the overmantel.

His father's own portrait hung on the side wall, between the spinet and the library door. He guessed at once that it had been painted in the first days of the war, just before Harrison Chisholm had gone to join the staff of Beauregard. General Chisholm stood ramrod-stiff in his new brigadier's coat, the stars of his rank all but hidden by the gray cascade of his beard. The hand on the sword hilt was knotted firmly—a hero's hand from an older time. The eyes, a clear, blazing blue, met his son's eyes kindly. Heroes of my stamp (those eyes said) will make your world secure. That world was meant for gentlemen—and gentlemen will have the wit to keep it.

Julian stared at the painting he had never seen, respecting that arrogance even as he grieved for his father's less-than-heroic end. It was monstrous that Harrison Chisholm had been captured after one unwise cavalry charge at First Manassas and had died of jail fever in Baltimore. It was even more bizarre that his only surviving son should have married almost at the moment of the elder Chisholm's demise, granting the family name to a proven enemy. Or so another, unyielding Julian reasoned even as the real Julian moved down the room to avoid the question in his father's eyes.

The salon swam into perspective now. He saw that the curtains were haggard with age and too much sunlight. Even here stray bullets had splintered the windowpanes, gouging a mahogany highboy, reducing a jade figurine to a small pyramid of rubble. But his drawing room was still inviolate, its chandeliers muffled in cheesecloth, its furniture hooded against dust. Here, at least, the past and present could meet and merge. Ghosts could whisper at will behind the tall-backed chairs —or was it the wind at a broken pane that spoke of long ago?

He did not turn a hair when a figure stirred in the shadow of the room's end. A square-rigged figure in black that came to meet him with a stubby paw extended. Somehow he had known that his father's overseer would be waiting just outside the library door.

"How are you, Mac?"

"How are you, Mr. Julian? Better. I can see that with my one good eye."

Macalastair's burr was even thicker than he remembered; the massive body seemed gnarled by the rheumatism that had always plagued the Chisholm overseer without slowing his devotion to the estate and its legitimate function. This, in Macalastair's view, was to make Harrison Chisholm—and his heirs and assigns—rich beyond the dreams of Croesus. If that dream had dimmed at the edges, there was no hint in the overseer's bearing. Mac's presence, as always, was amazingly comforting. His grin, like his handshake, seemed built to last till doomsday.

"You've come down to work, sir?"

"From this day forward."

"Your lady hoped for as much. That's why I brought the books along."

Julian glanced down at the volumes at their feet—thick ledgers all, bound in pigskin of Chisholm curing. The books had always been part of Macalastair. Julian had stumbled over them often as a boy, on this same threshold, while Harrison Chisholm and Mac argued within. Even then he had guessed that they owed much of their plenty to this tight-minded Scot. There had been no red-ink entries in Mac's books when Harrison Chisholm had ridden off to his *beau sabreur* war.

"Be frank. Will your ledgers make good reading for a man fresh from a sickroom?"

"Better than you expect, sir. Much, much better—thanks to that wife of yours."

"You won't mind if I check some other papers first—and see you later?"

"Choose your own time, Mr. Julian. I'll be at the office until dark."

"Don't tell me that's still standing?"

"Plus a scar or two—like us all."

"Remind me to thank you for saving those hundred bales."

"No thanks needed, sir. I know my duty, with thieves about."

"Those bales saved us from going under. I'm sure of that much already——"

"They did indeed, sir," said Macalastair cheerfully. "And don't leave out the lady you had the good sense to marry."

"I shan't, Mac. But my wife has done too much now——"

The overseer glanced at him quickly, then bent to retrieve the last of his books. "I'll grant you it's only a start. We must find us a pot of gold—and find it quickly."

"Leave that to me. I'll manage."

"I'm sure you will, Mr. Julian. Haven't I always said you're the stoutest chip from the old block?"

Watching Mac shuffle into the hall, Julian could envy the overseer his haven of mathematics. It was comforting to know that Macalastair would back any decision he made, including the one he had reached at this very moment. Obviously Chisholm Hundred had no choice but to ask Peabody for a loan. . . . He stood in the library door while that hard fact settled in his mind. George Peabody had always been the estate banker. Owing his very existence to Chisholm Hundred in the past, he could do no less than back the estate today.

Of course it was quite possible that Peabody's Bank (a squat marble-and-limestone shrine at the corner of Front and Market streets) had ceased to function. But Roy had said that the war had left Wilmington all but untouched; the banker had certainly survived, with the city that nourished him. The George Peabodys, after all, were the sort that endured forever.

Or so the new master of Chisholm Hundred reasoned as he pushed into the library. He could have questioned Macalastair in detail, but a planter did not discuss financing with his overseer. Nor could he pause to ask his wife's approval, when no other course was open. On that note he settled at his father's desk, accepting the responsibility as his own.

The library welcomed him gravely. He saw at once that Roy had kept it well ordered for his return: the calfskin sets looked freshly dusted; the busts of long-dead philosophers (ranged on pedestals between the shelves) gleamed brightly, as though the marble of their noble foreheads had been chiseled only yesterday. Even the desk blotter was new; the stack of note paper under his hand rustled crisply

as he picked up a pen. He did not write his letter at once. Instead he turned to the fat Chisholm Bible, riffling the leaves until he reached the black-ruled pages between the Testaments that held the family records.

Timothy Chisholm had brought that Bible across the Atlantic from the ancestral home in Kent. Chisholms of the colonial era were listed here in neat order—as neatly as they reposed in the family burying ground. Here and there, he noted, a name had been blotted out: a son who had dared to defy his father, a wastrel whose debts had exceeded his will to live. For the most part, the record was clean and shining. . . . Here generals marched through every war. Judges handed down their rulings from a high court bench in Washington. Senators thundered of states' rights in that same capital. Here, as he turned another page, were his own immediate relatives, set down in Harrison Chisholm's own hand. His own name, just below Mark's. Anna, who had died at birth. Matthew, who had lived to the ripe age of six before he succumbed to a putrid fever. Mary Randolph Chisholm, the mother he scarcely knew, who had followed Matthew at the age of nineteen.

He was almost at the end now. Here was the record of Mark's marriage to Lucy—and Mark's death, without issue, in August 1860. The final entry had been made in another hand—a tight, clerical fist that must have been Macalastair's:

Harrison Chisholm. Dead in army prison, Baltimore, circa October 27, 1862.

Births, marriages, deaths. He turned back to the marriage column to write his own name, glad that he must begin on a fresh page, a safe remove from Lucy and all that name evoked:

Julian Chisholm, married Jane Anderson. At sea, aboard Creole Queen, westbound to Nassau, B.W.I., October 27, 1862.

The words seemed cold enough, staring back at him from the heavy parchment page. He blotted them precisely and closed the Bible, turning the heavy key in its lock and adding the key to his pocket chain.

God grant us patience, he thought; our love must return with time. Does it matter who she was, when I know what she's given to save my world?

Someday, he thought, I'll learn to thank her as she deserves. But she's carried my burdens long enough. The task of rebuilding is mine, now I'm well again. He reached for his note paper, dipped his pen, and wrote at furious speed, without pausing for words.

vi

Breeze from the river stirred his lank hair. He stood on his portico and watched his demand for cash go down the Wilmington pike. George Peabody would read the note within the hour, and it was not yet noon. . . . His eyes searched the flawless summer sky, wondering once again how the sun could smile so benignly on this gutted land.

Even from this untouched corner the ruin that was Chisholm Hundred assailed him from every side. War had gouged the land with its cannon fire, crisscrossed the lawn with trenches the grass had only begun to heal, blackened the ridge behind the house to a charred horror. Here at the house itself he could rejoice that the central block of masonry and the wings that housed the drawing room and library had been virtually unharmed. But the east wing was a mere skeleton, with patched remnants here and there.

The formal gardens below the portico were a paradise of weeds; through a tall stand of dog fennel he glimpsed the shell of what had been the larger of the cotton gins. And yet, as Roy had said, the vandals' hands had stopped short of complete destruction. The truck garden that had once supplied the slave quarters was freshly tilled. The quarters themselves, the smithy, and the huge rectangle of stable had been only pock-marked here and there by flames or gunfire. The smaller of their two gins, standing on the slope to the landing, was entirely untouched, though the wharf itself had been smashed to matchwood.

On the eastern flank of the house the cannonading had churned the earth to ribbons: the scars showed even now under the mantle of weeds. But his mother's rose garden, ignored by Mars, was a riot of untended blossoms. A virgin garden turned harlot with August, flaunting her charms to the bees. . . .

Silence brooded over all, broken only by the lazy stir of poultry in the stable run, the whine of a saw in the wood lot behind the ridge. It

was this stillness that oppressed him most of all. This half-ruined house and the ravaged acres around it seemed only a painted backdrop for disaster, waiting to vanish in a final puff of flame.

It hardly helped, at this moment, to remind himself that every pair of hands was needed in the cotton rows; that only Macalastair (too bent by rheumatism to ride with the field gangs) could be spared today.

And yet, despite the silence and the odd sense of disaster impending, he did not feel alone. Eyes were watching the estate from more than one quarter—he could trust Jane for that. He had not missed the flicker of butternut-brown among the tree trunks along his drive when his former houseboy had thundered down the road with his letter to Wilmington. He was sure that Amos Martin (that model bushwhacker) had posted guards on the ridge, in the wood lots to the west, and along the riverbank. Marauders might come and go at will outside the Chisholm acres; for the time being, his own land was secure.

But he had lingered too long in the ashes. Macalastair would be waiting in the estate office—a kind of tower built into the masonry of the great stable block. It was good to rattle up those stairs and burst into Mac's presence with an exuberance he was far from feeling.

The overseer sat over his papers in a curve of desk that looked out through a matching curve of tower window. Standing at this height, the desk could dominate three quarters of the horizon, permitting Mac to check his fields at a glance. Under his hands was the relief map of the estate, squared off by quarter sections and shaded in a dozen colors. Green stood for cotton here, yellow for corn, red for clover. Tobacco-brown marked the fields devoted to Virginia leaf, for Chisholm Hundred had always outsold its neighbor to the north. Today Julian needed no explanation of those black squares: at every point of the compass the land gave back the ghastly answer. Only the south hundred, a strip of prime land along the riverbank, was green with healthy cotton today—and flashing with field hands' hoes. He stood quietly at Mac's elbow, hearing the distant shouts of his workers—a sound that could still mean life for Chisholm Hundred after the long waste of war.

"Read your books, Mr. Julian," said the overseer. "There's nothing like a good column of figures for a man who's been too long alone."

He settled on a stool beside Macalastair, grateful once again for the solid assurance of those pigskin ledgers. The overseer traced the entries with a dry quill. Most of them were in his own hand. Others were in a finer script, and Julian guessed without asking that these were Jane's.

They read the field log first. Mac, he perceived, had done all he could to ready the land for its next planting, even while Lee still stood between Grant and Richmond.

April 1, '65. Four double plows, turning south hundred. Two single plows listing on manure. Two men planting corn for stock in north forty.

"Mr. Davis was still in the State House then, Mac. So was most of his Cabinet——"

"Land must renew, fight or no fight. Here's an early entry after your—your return."

May 20, '65. Hoeing rows in south hundred, all hands. Mrs. Chisholm overseeing. Rain in afternoon. All hands in stable, calking leaks.

Julian frowned at the entry. It was humiliating to find that he had no memory of that day or month.

June 2, '65. Six men repairing fences for house pasture. Last squatters cleared from bottoms along Border Creek. Fifty men in south hundred, hoeing cotton rows. Mrs. Chisholm overseeing.

He closed the logbook on that entry. The same item had appeared all that spring and summer, almost without variation. He knew now why his wife's throat and arms were mahogany-brown, why her fingers were deep-callused as any picker's.

"Do we have an account of sales, Mac?"

"We do indeed, sir. You'll find some unusual items here. They'll need explainin', I fear."

But Julian was already nodding his agreement as his brows knit over the initial entry:

Sold to McIlroy and Painter, cotton factors in Wilmington, May 15:
50 bales, 400 lbs. each, @ 60¢ per lb.: $12,000

"Was this the cotton you hid at Bowen's Bluff?"

"'Twas none other, Mr. Julian. Lightered it to those factors myself, at risk of life and limb."

"But my wife said that cotton was bringing a dollar a pound all summer long."

"To the *factors*, yes. We were still lucky to bank sixty cents when we sold at seventy-five. At the time we weren't even labeled loyal."

"Take it slowly, Mac. I'm trying hard to understand."

"Most of the cotton hereabouts has been seized by Federal agents —and most of *them* moved upriver with the gunboats. Slapped a rebel label on each bale—and took it to an army warehouse for safekeeping. In the name of the Union, of course. Later on those same agents sold to factors like McIlroy—the money to go down on the army books as reparations. If you ask me, little enough of it has reached Washington."

"Are you telling me that a planter can't sell his own cotton—at his own terms?"

"Not if it was ginned during the war and the planter fought on the wrong side."

"But that includes us all."

" 'Twas the precise reason for the ruling, sir."

"But no plantation owner can start from scratch. Even with credits abroad, he counts on his last crop to plant the next——"

"Exactly, Mr. Julian. That's why I hid those bales at the Bluff. And why your lady got herself a loyal label, her first trip to Wilmington."

"For the crop you're making now?"

"For the future, yes. No telling what these radicals in Washington will do to us. Believe me, it took real scheming to unload what we had this summer. Asking price—*and* selling price—was a dollar a pound on the Wilmington docks. We took seventy-five cents from a pair of Yankee rascals. And banked sixty, after we'd greased palms all around to get a bill of sale under their name." Macalastair spread his gnarled fingers across the ledger. "Course we wouldn't have dared if Mrs. Chisholm hadn't known the commanding general."

"It seems I'm luckier than I know."

"You are indeed, sir. These fellows are swarming through the valley nowadays, smoking out every planter who still has a few wartime bales tucked away. Offering to sell in their name, you understand. But if you're a known Reb, you take what they're willing to give. Twenty per cent of the Wilmington price, if the factor's in a good humor."

"This isn't the only entry."

"Read what follows, sir. It'll cheer you mightily."

Sold to Burke Hanover, cotton factor in New Bern, May 25:
20 bales, 400 lbs. each, @ 80¢ per lb.: $6,400

"Twenty cents more. How did that work out, Mac?"

"Mrs. Chisholm again. Hanover was cutting things too fine—not only with planters, but with inspectors at the docks. Your wife learned as much from her friends in the provost's office and suggested that Hanover meet our price, make a fair profit, or leave the state. Hanover paid us eighty a pound."

"You could call that blackmail."

"Not if you'd known Hanover. Persuasion's a better word."

"I'll take your definition for now. What's this last item?"

"Hanover again. Thirty bales at ninety a pound."

"That makes a gross of close to thirty thousand. Yet my wife says our treasury's almost empty."

"There was hard ground to break for that new crop, sir. And hungry mouths to feed. Top that with the wages the Bureau makes us pay, and you have the story——"

"If we add the cost of the hospital we're running for all and sundry."

"Lord save us, Mr. Julian. If we don't care for our sick, who will?"

"I'm not complaining, Mac. Just wondering how we'll function without money."

"That's your decision, sir, not mine."

"Roughly, how much will we need?"

"Mrs. Chisholm thinks fifteen thousand more will do it, now the plowing's over. Believe it or not, we had to take out palmetto roots with gunpowder before we could see the earth." The overseer played with a pen for a moment. "I'd say nearer twenty—even if we can spare hands to put in more truck gardens. It's the food that's breaking us, now the estate don't feed its own——"

"I think we can manage twenty thousand—don't you?"

"There's ways to find money, Mr. Julian. Even today I'm sure that Mrs. Chisholm——"

"I'm on my feet again, Mac. As you said, this is my worry now."

"And none of mine, sir." The overseer took the sudden chill in stride. "It's my duty to tell you our needs—nothing more."

The name of George Peabody was already on Julian's lips; it would never do for Macalastair to think that the confidence he enjoyed was less than complete. But a shout from the lawn outside brought them both to their feet before he could speak. A shout that was more an agonized wailing, breaking their strained silence, bringing them both to the stair on the run.

vii

Julian reached the gateway to the quarters a dozen strides ahead of the panting overseer and knelt beside the Negro who lay, still bellowing, in a widening pool of blood. A glance told him that the wound —a deep cut just above the elbow—was not mortal, despite the bright red stream pumped out with each heartbeat. Nor did he need the silence from the wood lot to explain the genesis of that gash. This was not the first time that a handsaw had jumped its cradle while the field hands split stove lengths for the estate.

"Who is it, Mac?"

"Jethro. A green hand——"

"I can see as much. Will you call Dr. Rothschild?"

There was no time for more. The wiry young Negro, with a last deep-throated bellow, half sprang, half staggered to his feet and reeled toward the former slave cabins and the hospital unit they now housed. Even at the moment Julian could marvel at the instinct that had led the boy straight to the doctor's sanctuary, even when he was bug-eyed with fright. He spun Jethro with one hand on his shoulder—and dodged a fist as the terror-crazed Negro lashed at him with his good arm. Macalastair stepped between them coolly, dropping Jethro to the lawn with a hard-hit right to the jaw.

"Some of them go balmy at the sight of their own blood," he said. "Looks like an artery this time—eh, Doctor?"

Julian only half heard the question. He had knelt beside the unconscious figure once again; now his fingers dug deep into the muscles of the upper arm until he could compress the main vessels between finger and bone. Almost at once the red spurting died to an ooze. He met the overseer's eyes, unsmiling.

"Get me a tourniquet, then call Dr. Rothschild."

"Dr. Rothschild's in Wilmington. This is his clinic day."

"What do you mean?"

"The Negro clinic at the Bureau. It was Mrs. Chisholm's idea."

Mrs. Chisholm's idea . . . Julian heard his voice cursing no one in particular, even as his hands (trained in a hard, sure school) moved to check the depth of the cut and the flesh tone around it. The artery had been severed—or at least a large branch. Fortunately the cut had raked far enough forward to escape damaging the nerve. One part of his mind catalogued these facts nimbly enough. The rest continued to curse as fluently as before.

Mrs. Chisholm's idea. That phrase had echoed in his ears all day, wherever he had looked into the workings of his domain. It had been Jane's idea to have him declared incompetent—and to hasten to Wilmington to acquire a "loyal" label. It was she who had cowed the cotton factors, using the first weapons at hand. She had all but bankrupt the estate to feed every mouth that gaped on his doorstep. Finally, it was she who had sent Louis Rothschild to the Freedman's Bureau to help Union doctors in a thankless task, which meant that the plantation clinic was in charge of Noah Heath.

He had not come back from the war to assist a Negro doctor in a makeshift clinic. Above all (he snatched the improvised tourniquet from Macalastair and twined it into place with practiced hands), he would not gut his fields forever, and his treasury, to bind up a whole county's wounds. And yet even as he raged he knew that he would save this Negro's life today—and save others, while he could. Somehow—and he resented this all the more, as he admitted it was not Jane's actual doing—he had been maneuvered into a corner where he must strain his talents to the utmost or bow to another, deeper defeat.

"Where's Heath?"

"In the surgery, Doctor," said Macalastair. "I'll carry this boy in while you—prepare yourself."

"So I'm to operate—is that it?"

"Dr. Heath assumed as much, sir." Macalastair hefted the wounded Negro, tossed him on one shoulder in a surprising burst of strength, and vanished through the hospital door.

Following on the overseer's heels, Julian saw that he had entered what was once a slave cabin, joined to the next dwelling by a latticed breezeway. Linked in this fashion, the quarters now composed a

respectable hospital unit, enclosing a central courtyard roofed with canvas. Negro babies had once tumbled in play on that sun-baked earth. Today it held all the cots the space allowed. Others stood head-to-footboard in the cabins themselves. Nearly all the beds were filled. Starvation, fever, or both marked nearly every face that lifted to smile gratefully at his passing. He strode on, dogging Macalastair's advance, ignoring the low murmur that pursued them.

The surgery was the old headman's cabin, latticed at one end to admit sun and air, with a dispensary and splint room in the lean-to. Heath was already in attendance beside the well-scrubbed table, his shoulders squared in a white tunic, his hands folded under a chlorine-soaked towel. The whole room was as spotless as the Negro doctor's own person. Julian's eyes opened wide as he paused beside the surgeon's kit on the side table. The well-honed battery of steel that Louis had brought from New York was far more complete than his own set —lost in the holocaust at Richmond. He counted the shining scalpels, the forceps for the ligation of arteries, the curved aneurysm needles for placing sutures, the retractors for those ventures in ovariotomy that had once seemed so daring.

"We should go in at once, Doctor," said Heath.

"I'll be ready as soon as the patient."

The Negro surgeon smiled gently. "Surely you'll scrub before you begin? I've already soaked one instrument case in chloride of lime."

"Does Dr. Rothschild use chloride of lime?"

"Have you forgotten that he studied with you under Semmelweis?"

Chloride of lime, in this corner of the South . . . His mind spun back before the war to the skylight clinic of a hospital in Budapest and a man with blazing eyes. A short, febrile man who had stood before a hundred interns in surgery and dipped both hands in a basin that exhaled the same pungent odor now filling the surgery at Chisholm Hundred . . .

"Infection, gentlemen," said Semmelweis, the genius whom Europe called mad, "is conveyed by particulate matter. The method is the same, whether it is carried to a newly delivered mother or a surgical wound. The result is the same—inflammation and pyemia. There is one way to destroy particulate matter—by washing. Everything must be washed, gentlemen—especially the hands of the doctor."

Julian Chisholm, late surgeon of the Confederate States of America,

bowed from the waist, with no sense of strain, to the chocolate-dark assistant who faced him across the table. "Correction accepted, Dr. Heath. I scrubbed when I was able. Even at Vicksburg."

Macalastair and a brace of field hands had brought the patient to the table during this exchange. The overseer, after a quick glance from Julian to Heath, stepped back against the wall; the field hands lingered gingerly beside the table, ready to pin the patient down while the assistant administered the chloroform.

Scrubbing at the basin in the anteroom, Julian watched the Negro doctor prepare the Negro field hand for the ordeal ahead. Jethro was just beginning to recover from the daze induced by Macalastair's roundhouse punch; it was heartening to note Heath's gentle firmness as he placed the cotton cone above the patient's mouth and nose and began to drip chloroform from a half-stopped bottle. The odor merged with the reek of the limewater that covered the surgeon's hands. Already the patient's thrashing limbs had quieted under the iron compulsion of taut black fingers; when Julian came up to the table Jethro was sleeping like a child, snoring faintly between half-open lips.

Noah Heath had lifted the instruments from their chloride bath. They lay in a neat row on a towel beside the table: scalpels and forceps, the whipcord strands that would be used to ligate the vessel after the surgeon had probed and found the severed edges.

"Your patient, Dr. Chisholm."

"Thank you, Dr. Heath." He could afford another small bow as he picked up a scalpel and tested the razor-thin blade. Here, at least, was a battleground where men could meet as equals—regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. . . . The words sang like strange jargon in his brain as he let the steel outline his first exploratory incision. A tentative motion, as always, when blade and flesh were ready for their perilous meeting and the surgeon's hand faltered, reluctant to risk the first entry.

The two field hands had beaten a hasty retreat at a sign from Heath; Julian permitted himself an inward grimace when he saw the overseer follow hard on their heels. Laymen of Macalastair's vintage could be excused at moments like these: the blessing of anesthesia was a new thing, after all; Julian knew that Macalastair's brain echoed with the memory of frontier surgery in the generation before the war. In those days four stout hammer locks had been needed at every

operating table, and unconsciousness was the only solace as the knife bit home.

He let the scalpel enlarge the wound, with no orders from his brain, after Heath had sponged the area with limewater. Six months, he reflected, was a long time between operations; and yet his hand had lost none of its iron surety, once he had passed the hazard of that first stroke.

Already his fears were banished, as though they had never been—the fear that a fault of the steel might cut a nerve, dooming Jethro to paralysis of hand and arm, the other fear (how often had it haunted him?) that any surgery short of amputation could result only in gangrene and death.

"First, Doctor, we must see the bleeder clearly."

The knife had bitten deep in black skin to expose the solid welts of muscle beneath; he watched his left hand separate the edges of the wound, even as the steel probed deeper to open the muscle fiber below. Heath was feeding pledgets of linen into the operative area; sponging in rhythm, Julian saw that the artery he had hoped to secure lay deep, indeed. Yet it was within the area where delivery was relatively simple to a hand that had not lost its skill.

The scalpel reversed in his palm. He let his fingers follow the blade, seeking the artery. For a tense moment he found nothing; then he smiled again at Heath as he tested, and identified, a tubular shape that rolled and pulsed beneath his touch. Again he used the blunt end of the scalpel to dissect downward, until the firm, undamaged wall of the main artery was throbbing in the depths of the wound.

Already it seemed evident that only a branch had been hurt. But it's still deep, he thought. Too deep for mistakes. Too retracted, even now, to risk the slightest fumbling.

Heath's fingers moved beside his own, helping to pack the enlarged area with fresh linen pledgets; Heath's free hand offered the first suture, a heavy whipcord thread that snaked into the heart of the wound as though it had belonged there always.

"We can control the bleeding now."

As he spoke Julian slipped the blunt end of the suture needle beneath the vessel, grasped the end of the whipcord as it came through, and pulled both ends free, making a workable loop about the bulge of the artery. Now, at least, he could breathe freely while he pressed on

to finish his task; once the loop was pulled taut, hemorrhage could be handled at will.

"Can you reach the tourniquet, Doctor?"

Noah Heath nodded and let his hand glide down the patient's arm. Jethro sighed audibly, though he was still in deep anesthesia, as the cruel bite of the line eased at his shoulder. Blood filled the wound instantly, bubbling redly at its lower angle; Julian studied the direction of the flow for an instant before he let the loop tighten around the great trunk of the vessel, and sponged the area clean. When he released the bleeder again, it was easy to locate the cut end of the smaller vessel, well forward in the gash. Selecting a slender-jawed forceps from the row on the table, he plunged deep, seized the ruptured end of the auxiliary artery, and clamped it shut. Instantly the bleeding stopped, with no further need for control from the whipcord above it.

"Fortunately it was only a branch of the main artery."

Noah Heath smiled. "In wartime we weren't always so lucky."

"Would you care to tie off, Doctor?"

"It would be a pleasure, Dr. Chisholm."

Rumors of Heath's skill had reached him, but it was a pleasure to watch the Negro surgeon in action. Lister himself could not have tied off a bleeder more cleverly; Heath's method of packing the clean, wide-open wound was part of the same flawless technique. Thanks to prompt teamwork, Jethro's recovery was all but certain; the wound, inflicted in the open air without other human contact, should close promptly.

"It's good to have you with us, Dr. Chisholm."

"It's good to be back." The words had come unbidden.

"After all, there's nothing like doing the work one was born to do."

"Nothing in this world."

The Negro closed the compress and stepped back from the table. Neither of them spoke while the patient was moved to his waiting cot. Then, obeying another impulse he could not quite control, Julian offered his hand. Noah Heath pressed it solemnly.

"The field gang is riding in for the nooning—would you care to watch?"

Julian stepped to the porch of the surgery. The dust had just begun to settle on the work road; the field hands were still pouring into the stable yard—some on muleback, others crowded in cotton wagons.

Early arrivals, sprawled at ease in the shadow of the high brick walls, had already begun to cheer the cook wagon that Roy was trundling down the kitchen breezeway. White and black alike seemed linked in a curious camaraderie at that moment—weary from a long, hard morning, ravenous with the same hunger, powdered from head to toe with the same Carolina earth.

"They can work together, you know," said the Negro doctor. "We're proving as much here at Chisholm Hundred."

"So I see. . . ."

"Is it too great a shock, Dr. Chisholm? Be honest: at this distance, can you tell one from another?"

Julian blinked and looked again; Noah's question had been fair enough. White skin and black, covered with the same rich earth of the bottom land, tended to merge there in the grateful shade of the stable yard. Clad in the same odd bits of Confederate gray, in cast-off forage caps and work jeans, the field gang seemed one yeasty human mass, eager to prove itself.

Amos Martin slouched in his saddle at the stable gate, a rifle cradled in one arm. Without glancing beyond the poverty-thin shoulder of Jane's lieutenant, Julian could guess that others of the bushwhacker band were posted along the road—a cogent reminder that Chisholm field hands were adequately protected at noon as well as midnight. It was an effective silhouette, in clear view of any passer-by on the Wilmington pike. An hour ago he would never have admitted, even to himself, how comforting it could be.

If Amos seemed in place at the moment, the figure who rode up to join him was no less germane to Chisholm Hundred today. Slender even in corduroys, Jane Chisholm rode her shaggy work pony as confidently as any bushwhacker. She accepted the shouts of her field hands as a personal accolade, and mingled her shout with theirs as Roy wheeled the cook wagon into their midst.

"Negro and poor white, working side by side," said Noah Heath. "Breaking bread in the nooning, as though they'd been friends forever . . ." He offered Julian his most disarming smile. "Not that I expect you to endorse that view as yet, Doctor."

"Couldn't it have come someday, without war?"

"War, Dr. Chisholm, is a curious form of human illness. Yet only a cynic would say that all illnesses are suffered in vain."

Roy was serving a thick meat stew from the cook wagon; a brace

of helpers had just come out of the kitchen, bearing heaping pans of bacon buns. Julian could remember other noonings in this same stable yard when the repast had been less bountiful. Vegetable stew had been the rule, with a rigorously measured portion of dripping. Sorghum, and a prize of rum for the team that had sweated the most bags to the loading scale. True, there had been a chunk of fat pork in every cooking pot in the quarters at the day's end, and a roast fowl on saints' days. . . .

"It won't last, of course," said Heath. "You've worked too long at being master and slave in this corner of America."

"Who's the cynic now?"

The Negro doctor smiled gently. "Then you'll grant it's a happy sight?"

"Will you believe me when I say that I'd give anything to have my father witness it?"

"They were defeated men only yesterday, Dr. Chisholm. Desperate, sullen men. But they're working as a team—and they'll go on working tomorrow. Until the scalawags spoil them. Or our friends in Washington pass another law. As of now, they've come together on their own. To work for something bigger than themselves——"

"Can you give it a name?"

"Democracy will do," said the Negro. "A noble concept—even though it's been badly perverted by our spellbinders. So badly perverted, it hasn't even been tried. I'd say you were observing a rough demonstration at this moment. I'd advise you to cherish it before it yields to something more sinister."

From the tight-packed beds behind them a fever case moaned loudly—a muted, heart-catching fumble for life that could not be ignored. Julian and Heath both turned, but it was the Negro who reached the hospital door, holding the white doctor on the porch with an easy gesture.

"That's my case, Dr. Chisholm. And I've every hope of saving it. You might cross over to the stable yard if you're in the mood—and lunch with the hands."

Julian heard the clinic door sigh shut and knew he was alone again. By the same token, he knew that he would always be alone until he took the next long step forward.

Beyond the walls of the stable yard the laughter of the field hands

rose and fell like surf in the hot summer air. Jane, still astride her work pony, was deep in talk with Amos and unaware of his presence on the porch. So far as she knows, he thought swiftly, I'm still indoors. Crouched in the ruins of the past, and spitting curses at the future. She'll never know how well I've passed my morning. Not until I bring her proof.

Once he had taken the first long stride, it was no effort at all to enter the stable yard. He walked calmly through the crowd, feeling his heart lift in earnest as he cupped both hands to shout his wife's name.

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It was dusk when they reined in on the fire-blackened ridge above the house. Without lifting his eyes from Jane's, without stirring from the circle of attention he had drawn about their long ride, he knew that dusk would be kind to his land. Already the twilight had blunted the desolation at the edges. It had wrapped the riverbank in silver-gray; it had softened the scarred façade of his home, until the house and the formal pattern of the hillside were all he remembered, and more.

He heard Jane's voice from a distance. Once again he stifled an urge to mention the note he had sent to George Peabody—and the banker's answer, which would surely be waiting now. Jane had done wonders during his illness, but Jane was a woman, after all. He had met her halfway—and more—there in the stable yard. From this point on he would take command.

At his insistence, and with strong urging from Macalastair, Jane had agreed to keep clear of the cotton rows this afternoon. Instead she had ridden dutifully beside the master of Chisholm Hundred on his first real tour of the estate. Now they had paused by common consent on the ridge—at the precise spot where Lucy's belvedere had once stood in breeze-haunted isolation. He turned his back firmly on that passion-haunted ground and let his mount dance closer to Jane's work pony.

"I should have come back sooner," he said, knowing that she would believe the wish behind his words.

"You're back now, my dear. That's all I care about."

Shaggy work horse and broken cavalry nag caromed closer; for an instant their thighs were almost touching. He let the tenderness build between them and prayed that it would endure.

"Next year we should have three thousand acres in cotton alone," she said. "If we can find the hands——"

"And the money." He had echoed her tone. Watching her ride a bit farther down the ridge, he guessed that she had broken free of that moment deliberately.

"We'll find the money, Julian."

"And spend it?"

"Every penny we can scrape together belongs to this land. And to its people. That's all I can think of now."

"And the owner? What becomes of him?"

"I don't know—yet. I only know that we must *all* recover our strength. All of us together."

"How many owners will agree?"

"Do you realize that congressmen in Washington are shouting now for complete equality in the South? Demanding that every large plantation be broken up and given to its former slaves?"

"Not even the radicals would dare that much——"

"I don't think it will happen. But we must top such plans by our—our own example. If Chisholm Hundred can give its slaves a decent living again—and by *slaves* I mean poor whites, too, every man who depended on your father for his bread——" She did not complete the sentence. Instead she gave her pony his head, cantered briskly downhill, and waited for him to join her on the work road. "Is that too much to hope for?"

"No, Jane. And I do want to thank you for the start you've made. It's just that I'm my father's heir—through no fault of mine——"

"I know, my dear. It's a heavy burden."

"I'm ready to shoulder it. I've put my—my illness behind me. Do you believe that too?"

"Of course, Julian."

"And I'm not asking for profits, as of now. Only for a—a margin of safety. Some assurance that I can keep what we had. Or part of it, at least." He knew he was expressing himself badly and began anew: "Less than a year ago most of these Negroes were mine. Must I belong to them today?"

"Never in this world. But I do insist we must give them a chance to prove themselves. Some of them never will. Some are too close to the jungle to be—worthy of independence. Others will never be happy without some master to depend on. But you'd be surprised how many have come out of hiding this summer—to work for *themselves*. To be on their own at last." She broke off, as though she was a bit ashamed of repeating a hope so easily grasped, and smiled at him appealingly there in the gathering dusk. "You said yourself that your father was eager to give the Negroes that chance——"

"So was more than one planter in the valley."

"But of course they never could, not while cotton was king in England. Not while so many were making fortunes overnight. Do you realize that the whole war was fought to *protect* that kind of owner and his millions?"

"My father was still one of them."

"And he went with his state, like a good citizen. Now you're faced with the problem he could never solve—a problem that should have been solved by degrees. You must solve it this year or the next. Or you'll go under." There was an edge to her voice now. "Ride down this valley if you don't believe me. See how your friends have met the challenge."

"My friends were unlucky," he said. "They didn't come home with a hand-picked bodyguard—and a wife like you."

Even in the half-light he saw her blush and knew that she had taken the compliment at its face value—hungrily, as a woman will when she has been alone too long.

"Then you endorse what we've done so far?"

"All but the empty treasury."

"I'll admit it was bad business to feed and clothe every stray. But I couldn't help it. Any more than Noah and Louis could help filling that hospital——"

Again he nodded soberly. Now that he was on his feet, with the fever behind him, he knew that he would have done the same, so long as the money lasted.

Obviously the wreckage of Lee's and Johnston's armies would find its way home in time; the clinic hospital would hardly overflow his lawns forever. Tomorrow or the day after he would learn what his friends in the Cape Fear Valley thought of such largess—and their

opinion of Jane herself. . . . It was enough for now to realize that they were closer than they had ever been.

When Jane spoke again, the words came softly, as though she feared to break their camaraderie with an ill-considered phrase. "The treasury won't be empty always, Julian."

You're quite right there, he thought. Starting tomorrow, those purse strings will be drawn a bit tighter—by my hand. But this is no time for argument. I can hardly explain that Chisholm ladies don't ride with their field hands, in a field hand's garb. Or that Chisholm ladies don't let their curtains go bad from too much sunlight while they labor in a cotton row. . . .

"What are you thinking, Julian?"

He drew himself in a little, wondering how deeply she had penetrated his mask. "Only that it's good to be back."

"It's good to have you back," she said, and let her hand cover his. He raised her fingers to his lips and knew that she was trembling. Even at this strange moment he guessed that the tremor did not come from fear.

"I've a great deal to make up to you, Jane. Will you be patient—while I make up my own way?"

"I'll be patient, Julian—but not too patient."

He knew there was only one meaning to the invitation in her eyes. Still claiming her hand, he put an arm around her and drew her down across his saddle. She lay deep in his embrace, unstirring, humid-eyed, her lips half parted. For a crazy instant, as their lips met, he was back in the past again, claiming her love in the shadow of a war. . . .

"Please, darling," she whispered, "don't go away again." She was gone before he could answer, taking the hillside at a gallop.

Giving his own horse a free rein, he stayed close behind—but not too close to overtake her at the stable gate. He heard the rush of her booted heels on the cobbles as he swept into the courtyard, and was just in time to watch her vanish through a side door of the house. He considered the wisdom of following at once, and vetoed the impulse firmly. She does love me, he thought. She's never ceased to love me. I must make love to her tonight—and, what's still more important, make my love convincing. To handle that assignment properly, I must catch my breath. . . .

Dusk was heavy in the great hall as he strode through to the library;

Plato and Homer and Voltaire gleamed whitely above the desk where the letter lay, in the precise center of the Florentine leather blotter. He broke the banker's seal with hands that shook a little despite his certainty of the contents:

My dear Julian:

It is Good, indeed, to know that you are Completely Recovered. Of course, your Father's Son has only to Ask—he shall Receive.

I shall have Papers ready for your signature tomorrow: the Thirty Thousand Dollars, hard money, is yours when you desire. Perhaps I should tell you now that the only Security allowable will be a First Mortgage on Chisholm Hundred. A Crop Lien is not feasible under Present Conditions.

As ever

George Peabody

The banker's note elated and depressed him in a breath. There was something musty about it—something shaky in old Peabody's fist, as though Wilmington's most venerable moneybags had gone a little shopworn. Yet there was no mistaking the jaunty confidence underneath. . . . He had always known that his father's friend (if a banker of Peabody's stripe could be anyone's friend) would outlive any war—and flourish in the peace.

The question of a mortgage did not trouble him unduly. Chisholm Hundred had been mortgaged before, when his forebears were buying land along the river, expanding the original grant to its present sweep. His own father had carried a chattel mortgage for years, when he was using his own side-wheelers to cut lighterage charges to Wilmington. True, an old family connection like Peabody should be willing to advance a few thousand with no security whatever, but he hardly needed the banker's assurance that these were hard times.

Standing eye to eye with Homer, he made his plans. In the morning he would visit Peabody in Wilmington and meet his terms. On his return he would call on such tidewater nabobs as he could trust and add their opinions to his own. His political uncle, General Clayton Randolph (whom he did not trust at all), would of course expect a duty visit. Then there were Judge Bowen and Hoyt Marshall and old General Stedman, to name just three. Provided, of course, they had survived the Yankee invaders.

Tonight he had more important business. Tonight he would make sure he was master of his house, inside as well as out.

Remembering the sudden fire in Jane's lips, he felt his pulse hammer with a familiar rhythm. She's upstairs now, he thought. Probably in the master's suite, making sure that all is in readiness, now that my convalescent days are over. Should I go to her now, prove I'm her husband in more than name?

Again a prudence that went beyond desire turned his steps from hall to portico. It was good to settle here after the long day, with his back against a pillar. Good to remember that other time when the gentlemen gathered here for their canonical sundowner and waited for their ladies to come to them—graceful as well-tailored dolls in their hoops, their loyal eyes shining with a love that was all devotion too. In those days there had been dozens of white-cane chairs along the flagstones. One had only to settle here, with booted feet on the fieldstone balustrade. One had merely to extend a hand, sure that a houseboy would appear from nowhere with a glass poised on a tray.

Now, seated on his doorstep again, watching the last of the sunset burn on the river, he found that he had put out his hand by rote. He felt his fingers close round a glass. Roy stood just behind him in the deep twilight, a djinn in faded livery, grinning above his hammered-silver tray.

"Brandy sling, Mist' Julian. Sorry we got no ice."

"You're a magician of the old school, Roy. How did you know I was here?"

"God save you, Mist' Julian, I *always* know when the master's on the portico."

It was his father's best Napoleon, a deep-bodied *fine champagne* with smoky richness in its bouquet. Blended with lime and sugar in Roy's best manner, it was precisely the key he needed to open the gates of fancy, to rebuild his world anew. He had not dared ask as yet if his father's cellars were intact, but he suspected that Macalastair would defend the Chisholm wine bins even more ardently than the family plate.

He let his mind wander down those cool catacombs for a moment, among racks of bottles that seemed never-ending. Canary and sack and Madeira, side by side with jugs of home-fermented grape. English beers and Irish stouts. Apple brandy and peach Moby from the Norfleet plantation across the county line. Corn whisky in individual charred kegs; bourbons and ryes—and scotches with crested labels.

In the depths of the cellar, where it was always cool, French and Italian champagnes and pale Rhine wines, ticketed by their vintage year—a noble collection, famous through the whole South.

A formal procession, as always, wound through those cellars in the last hour before a company dinner. Harrison Chisholm would select the wines with his own hand, and the Chisholm sons were expected to stand by at such solemn moments, to burnish their own knowledge of the vintners' art. One by one the dusty treasures would go back to Roy—a bottle of claret for each male guest, along with a brandy keg from Cognac, and magnums of champagne if fiddles and ladies were in prospect. The champagnes and the white burgundies would go to the icehouse for chilling. The Chambertins and the Pommards and the great château bottlings would be marshaled in long rows on the sideboard in the pantry. Opened with loving care (a half-hour before the gentlemen rode up for their sundowners on the portico), they would be allowed to come slowly to room temperature, ready to honor the most fastidious palates in Carolina.

Julian accepted a second brandy sling from Roy—and a third. The long, tense melancholy of the day had begun to dissolve almost without pain. He could even afford to smile at his grandiose memory of that wine cellar. Of course those bins were empty now. How could it be otherwise, with bummers nested in the east wing? Roy had been lucky to hide a few bottles here and there. Soon enough he would be glad for a glass of mountain dew at day's end, for raw rum from the cane presses downstream.

The rums in the Chisholm cellar had filled a whole wall: heavy dark Jamaicas and straw-colored bottlings from the Virgins, Haitian rums as fiery as their labels, New England brands as black as the blackstrap molasses from which they sprang. Fat kegs from a local still, which Roy had used to mix grog for the John Kuners at Christmas time . . .

The John Kuners belonged in a niche of their own, along with the frosty Christmas season and the happy, raucous music they made. Their singing would begin in the quarters just before dusk; the entire population of the big house (there were always many guests in that holiday season) would gather on this same portico to await their coming. . . . Julian let his eyes half close and drank deep of his fourth glass. He could see the procession now, winding through the kitchen

gardens; he could hear them round the house, chanting from bursting lungs:

"Hah! Low! Here we go!
Hah! Low! Here we go!
Hah! Low! Here we go!
Kuners come from Denby."

The noise would be deafening long before the procession could fan out on the front lawn—a din augmented by bone rattles, cows' horns, crashing tambourines. For this annual march the slaves dressed in deep-dyed crokersacks or harlequin rags fringed with strips of varicolored cloth. All would be masked, of course; horned and bearded, parrot-beaked, or stuffed with cotton to twice their normal size. Some masqueraded as animals, some as hunchbacked dwarfs. Others walked on stilts ten feet high—and even these were able, somehow, to caper in the wild rhythm of their chanting.

The Kuners never wore their welcome out. In a few minutes one of the leaders would approach the first step of the portico with a ragged hat extended: it was part of the ritual for Harrison Chisholm to leave his guests and walk among the revelers, dropping a handful of silver in each extended hat. Then the procession would move on, snaking among the oaks of the driveway, rounding the sundial on the eastern lawn, and vanishing at last in the kitchen portico, where a cake and a glass of hot grog awaited each reveler.

Peculiar to the Cape Fear region, the John Kuners had always danced at holiday time; no one was old enough to remember how the custom started, but Christmas would not have been Christmas without them. Still dreaming with half-closed lids, Julian could still see them on the dusk-dimmed lawn. . . . Then he was sitting bolt upright, with wide-open eyes and a chill at the base of his spine, for the whole lawn was indeed alive with ragged figures.

At first he was sure this was a band of marauders converging on the house Indian-fashion to complete his ruin. Then, as he half rose to defend his own, he saw the gleam of rifle barrels in the moving mass and recognized familiar faces above the guns. Amos Martin and company, it seemed, had the situation in hand: Amos was acting as herder-in-chief as the ragged silhouettes reached the sundial and turned toward the kitchen gate.

He rose to investigate on his own and drew back into the shadows again when he heard a step on the portico. Jane had come out while he watched. Now she walked straight into the group, with both hands extended—a kind of informal welcome that brought a low, grateful murmur in response.

She was wearing the same white dress he remembered from his sickroom; her hair, bound with a simple ribbon, flowed to her shoulder in a cowl of dark gold. At the moment, he reflected, there was something almost nunlike about her step, her soothing words. As the strange procession moved into the circle of light about the portico he saw that many of these tatterdemalion ghosts were still in uniform. Nearly all of them were barefoot. Many tottered rather than walked. Here and there was a Negro, bleary-eyed from fatigue, quite as ragged as the others in his new-found freedom.

"What was your corps?"

"Macready's, ma'am. Johnston's army. I'm fresh out of prison."

"And your home?"

"Savannah."

"You'll find supper on the kitchen porch—and a bed in the stable."

Most of what he heard was a variation on this theme. Jane seemed to find time for a word with each. He sat quietly in the shadow of the pillar and guessed that this was a nightly occurrence. Amos Martin's smooth handling of this limping column and the alacrity with which the last man vanished round the kitchen wing were ample proof of that.

"If you're sure you're quite finished——"

Jane started at the sound of his voice, then came toward him with her hands spread wide in lieu of apology. "I didn't know you were outside, dear."

"I'm not an invalid any more," he said, forcing a smile. "Or have you forgotten so soon?"

"I should have warned you that this nearly always happens around nightfall. Most of them hide out in the woods by day and move on with the dark. Don't ask me why, but they seem to know that ours is a friendly gatepost."

"Are they *all* walking home?" The question came out harshly, but he could not regret it. "Sure we aren't feeding a parcel of bummers disguised as heroes?"

"Amos is a past master at weeding out the scavengers." Jane spoke in a level voice, with no hint of reproach. "Go to Roy's cook wagon if you don't believe me."

"I believe you both, Jane. It's just that the war's been over since April——"

"It's a long walk South when you're just out of a prison pen."

"Seems even longer when you've been shaken down a few times," said Amos. "Or jailed as a tramp by some Yankee provost who should know better." As always, Julian felt the cold scrutiny in the mountaineer's eyes. Amos had always observed him thus, from a chill distance; thanks to his war record, he could hope that he had Amos's respect, if not his friendship.

"How do you keep them moving, Amos?"

"Victual 'em for a day. Two at the outside. Let 'em sleep all they like. By then most of 'em are ready to hit for home on both feet. If a boy's really sick, the docs can tell. Then we bed him down in earnest."

Jane was still smiling above her lieutenant's shoulder. "Now you can see where our first profits have gone, Julian. Can you blame us?"

Don't tempt me too far, he thought. Don't be too sure that I'll endorse your every move. But he kept his mask in place. He said only, "It's hard to turn one's back on hunger."

A low whistle—at the distance, it seemed more bird call than human—sounded from the wood lot. A guard on the lawn picked it up instantly, cupping his hands in a shout.

"Bummers, Amos! In the Hollow!"

The mountaineer turned on the points of his toes, lifting his rifle above his head—a visual signal that was picked up at a dozen points. Jane was already on the portico and rushing for the door with her skirts bunched. She turned on the threshold as Amos barked a question.

"Of course I'm coming too. I'll be down by the time you've saddled."

Amos ducked his head and whipped through the stable gate in a long-legged run. The other guards had vanished from the greensward with all the celerity of well-trained phantoms. Julian took a deep breath as he found himself deserted in a twinkling. *It's now or never,* he told himself solemnly. The words still echoed in his brain as he ran after Jane, trapping her on the landing.

"What's all this mean?"

"Didn't you hear? We've raiders in the swamp. I should have remembered it's payday——"

"Whose payday?"

"The Negroes' in the Hollow. The Freedman's Bureau gives them a weekly dole, whether they work or not." She ran down the hall as she spoke, with Julian at her side. "We always post a guard on the work road and pitch in, if need be. Usually the fight spills over to your land——"

"I still don't understand."

"Let me go, please, Julian. I'll explain later."

"I'm in charge here," he said quietly. "You'll explain now."

It was dark in the hall, but he caught the fire in her eyes just the same. For an instant he was sure she would push by and braced himself for the tussle to come. Instead her arms dropped limp at her sides.

"I'm only protecting what's yours, Julian."

"Aren't you forgetting that's my job now?"

"Perhaps. Are you asking to go in my place?"

"Not asking. Insisting."

He gripped her by both elbows as he spoke and swung her toward him, until they stood eye to eye. Once more he wished that Jane were five inches shorter and a bit less strong than he. It was an ideal moment to tower. Particularly for a husband who has just come into his own again.

"We can both go, Julian."

"Why go at all? Can't the Army put such disorders down?"

"The Army's in Wilmington."

"Certainly there are patrols——"

"Not tonight. It's *their* payday too. Though it's quite true that some of them may be there. Out of uniform—mixed with the bummers."

"Is it our duty to put down thieving?"

"It's someone's duty. Will you let me go?"

He did not relax his grip. "I'll ride over with Amos, since you insist. And you'll stay here till I return. Indoors—where you're out of danger. Is that clear?"

"Stay too, Julian. You aren't used to this."

"Are you forgetting I've lived through a war?"

"Not this sort of war, darling." Her voice broke on a high note of

tenderness. Prepared for anything but this, he felt his mouth go lax as her lips closed on it warmly. Closed and clung for a breath-taking instant, even as her whole body seemed to fuse with his in a straining embrace.

"Don't think I'm a fool, Julian. Please believe I know what I'm doing."

"You do now. You're staying here."

"Thank you for saying that. I wanted you to say it on your own." Again they kissed long and hard there in the fire-blackened hallway. "Do you begin to understand me a little now?"

"More than a little, Jane."

"And you will be careful? You'll do what Amos says?"

"For tonight, at least."

"Then go at once. And come straight home to me, darling. I'll be waiting."

He ran for the stable, his brain reeling with the scent of her hair, the promise in that last taut whisper. That promise, he knew, could have only one meaning.

ix

His heart was still thudding when he cut through the back hall to the kitchen court and raced for the stables. Louis Rothschild, he saw, was just dismounting at the main portico after his day in Wilmington. He did not even pause to wave. Louis could get the news from Jane, and stand by with his surgeon's kit, as needed. At this moment he was a landowner policing his borders, with no time to spare for colleagues of the clinic.

The stable yard was alive with lanterns; for the first time he counted heads in Jane's troop of guards and estimated their striking power. He saw at once that only a part of the force—perhaps a dozen in all—was preparing to ride out; the others, scurrying to assist their comrades-in-arms, had not laid aside their rifles. Amos was leaving two thirds of his force on the estate, and Julian nodded a silent approval as he ran up to report.

The bushwhacker leader sat astride his rawboned mount in the stable gate with the bridle of Jane's own sturdy work pony knotted

in his fist. Hearing the leader's name, one of the horse handlers lifted a lantern to Julian's face; he could feel a quick stiffening of backbones in the stable yard as his presence was noted.

"Where's your wife, Doc?"

"Indoors. I'll ride with you tonight."

Amos's eyes narrowed, but he did not protest further when the owner of Chisholm Hundred hit the work pony's saddle in a running leap. "It'll be the first she's missed."

"It won't be the last. What are we waiting for?"

"Nothin'—now you're aboard."

They crashed through the gate at a hand gallop—a dozen weather-beaten men, riding in a tight knot with Julian in their midst. Even at that moment he had time to marvel at the oneness of horse and rider, the breakneck ease with which they took the trace across the fields. Amos, scowling at his side, rode without reins, his knees goading his mount to greater speed. A ditch yawned in their path, but the whole troop swept over without a break in stride, Julian's stubby pony lifting with the others, and driving on. The leader's lantern streamed ahead, lighting the way into a wood-lot trail that paralleled the high-road, screening them from possible lookouts.

"How far is the Hollow, Amos?"

"Don't you know your own land, Doc?"

"Not in this blind man's pocket."

The leader slowed his pace a trifle, letting the pony come abreast. "You know Twelve-Mile Hammock—where your land joins the swamp?"

"Well enough."

"The Hollow's between the turnpike bridge and the swamp proper. Not a stone's toss from that south hundred you're plowin'. A fire in those shacks could spoil your cotton. And there's always a fire when bummers come looking for a freedman's pay."

The plume of flame that showed ahead through the canopy of water oak and bay grape endorsed the mountain man's prediction in advance. Julian leaned forward in his saddle to ask another question, just as Amos held up his hand for silence. The troop ground to a halt there in the thick darkness of the woods; he realized that pine and oak had given way to cypress and blue gum now, that the horses' hoofs were churning the black, viscous muck of the swamp. In the

same breath he had the answer to his question. Only a palm-thatch hut, tinder-dry at the summer's end, could burst into flame, firecracker-fashion, after a touch of a vandal's torch.

"They always start a bonfire to work by," said Amos. "It'll help us too, Doc—as you'll see. Douse those lanterns, men, and stay close."

Tight as a hunting pack, the horses moved deeper in the swamp at the same reckless gallop; the bushwhackers rode hunched in their saddles, dodging the lash of the wild-grape vines that hung like snakes in their path. Julian began to pick out landmarks as his pupils dilated in the gloom. He had fished and hunted often in Twelve-Mile Hammock, as the bog was called. He knew that it extended far down-river, from the boundaries of his land to the tidal marshes. Much of it was a trackless wilderness of muck and saw grass, accessible only to a flat-bottomed duckboat or dugout canoe.

Even in the old days the swamp had been a favorite refuge for runaway slaves and red-necks. These poor whites, fugitives from the law since birth, had always considered the swamp their special domain; now, it seemed, the free Negroes had gravitated to its murky shade. It was inevitable that the original denizens, augmented by the backwash of war, should consider the newcomers their special prey.

He rode close to Amos, forcing the pony's gait. "Are we still on Chisholm land?"

"See that branch just ahead? That's your boundary line. When we came here last April you had squatters right up to the highroad. They know better than to cross over now."

They forded the murky stream as Amos spoke, the horses wallowing knee-deep in the brackish water to take the far bank with hardly a lost stride. Julian noted instantly that the land was higher on this side; a thick, tangled screen of cabbage palms masked their movement on the right, where the whole sky seemed to dance with the flames. Moving like a fox in the maze, Amos had chosen their point of attack perfectly.

"We'll come into the Hollow from behind, Doc. Sneak in close and give 'em a surprise volley. It's worked before."

The troop swung in a short arc to the east, then ground to a stop as Amos held up his palm. Here the tangled palm grove had thinned a little; Julian could see a slope of sun-bitten grass beyond, its tufted surface luminous even in the starlight. This, he knew, was the be-

ginning of the Hollow, a circle of sandy loam in the very heart of the swamp. A kind of island in the bog, it was accessible only by canoe on the side toward the branch, or by faded trails that wound through the swamp to the distant turnpike.

The raiders had fired several huts, and, as Amos had said, their torches had ignited the palm-thatch walls in a pattern, so that the whole Hollow had begun to emerge from the darkness like the silhouette of a nightmare. Julian counted more than fifty rough shacks in the area. A few of them were high-stilted, with snug roofs; these, he guessed, had been built to withstand the spring rains. The others were mere hovels thatched with palm leaves, tilted at crazy angles by the last storm. As though to protect one another against the sinister wilderness that surrounded them, most of these shacks huddled in a kind of rough circle—so close that the walls seemed to merge. Others stood a bit apart, if only to avoid the stench that hung over the whole settlement—the dark brown reek of poverty and despair, tangible as a miasma in the flame-etched darkness.

"Sometimes we're tempted to let those fires go," said Amos. "Ought to burn this whole rat warren out, right down to the last mudsill. Course they'd only hole in deeper and build themselves another——"

"Does this happen often?"

"Every payday at the Bureau. Minute those red-necks smell the gin and hear the first song startin', they know their time has come." Amos slid from his saddle, an action that the whole troop duplicated instantly with the precision of well-rehearsed acrobats. No army patrol, thought Julian, could have moved with half this speed.

"Hold the hosses, Sam. You stay with him, Ben—and keep your guns in your boots. Others, belly-down and follow me."

Snaking through the grass at the mountain man's side, Julian waited tensely for the shots that did not come. The troop moved without sound until they reached the embers of a hut that had already burned to the ground; here Amos veered sharply to the left and paused again in the cover of a clump of palmettos. From this vantage point, almost within the main circle of huts, they had their first clear view of the marauders—perhaps a score of dark, hurrying figures who ranged from door to door, firing as they moved and howling like two-legged wolves. Their mounts were tethered apart in a tight circle, and Julian saw that two of the red-necks were posted here as guards. Evidently they had

not expected reprisals. Swooping on the Hollow without warning, they meant to vanish in the swamp just as swiftly.

"Horse guards first," said Amos. "You take the skinny one, Lafe; I'll drill the other. Plumb center, now—and remember, all of you, we're outnumbered. So we got to sound bigger than we are."

As he spoke Amos unlimbered his rifle; another trooper, at the left of the spread-eagled line, lifted his own gun barrel. Julian held his breath as he saw the mountain man's sights lower dead on the chest of the horse guard. The two reports sounded as one; with no sense of shock Julian watched the guards drop in their tracks, each with the same short gasp, as a heavy army slug found the heart.

"To the right," said Amos in the same dead whisper. "Keep shifting, and fire at will. Yell when I do—no oftener."

He seemed to vanish with the last words. Scrambling after him, Julian ducked with the others as the first answering shots came from the firelit darkness ahead. He was aware that two of the 'whackers had scuttled to the raiders' mounts, to spook them into the thickets; though he could not see them in the gloom, he guessed that the others were hot on Amos's trail. Nine men, counting himself, now had the task of outshooting at least a score of swampers—men outside the law, who would stop at nothing.

Strangely enough, he had no real fear, even now. He heard the high, spine-chilling keen of a rebel yell just ahead, and the baying chorus of the troop as they completed their circle and dropped to the grass for their first real volley. Thanks to the night and the element of surprise, he knew that the raiders—spooked, like their own mounts, by the onslaught—would be sure that a whole company of vigilantes had surrounded them before a shot was fired.

Orange flame cut the night in a blinding sheet; firing with the precision of regulars on parade, the 'whackers had shot to kill—and each man had found a target, thanks to the blazing background. He heard the rebel yell again from another quarter and knew that he was keening with the rest and tugging at the pistol in his belt. The second volley came almost at once, precisely timed to convey the picture of a vastly superior force closing on the Hollow from several quarters.

The marauders, with a dozen dead in their midst, were firing savagely in return, with no target but the night. Outmaneuvered from the first, they could only guess at the number of their enemy; with

no apparent leadership, they could only scramble for cover where none existed—or scuttle for the jungle on their own. Julian had a quick, sharp-etched glimpse of a black-maned giant with a sack across one shoulder, dodging from a sagging doorsill; he heard a pistol bark and knew that he had aimed and fired with no conscious volition. Black-mane bellowed and dropped his sack to clutch blindly at a wounded shoulder as he reeled from light to darkness.

"Nice shooting, Doc," said Amos. "If you ask me, that's the last of the lot. Nothin' a red-neck does better than run when he figures it's healthy."

"It can't be over so soon."

"But it is," said Amos calmly. "They move in fast—grab what they can—and skedaddle. This time every other man stays behind, dead. So it's a cold day before we have another raid this close to Chisholm Hundred." Amos was on his feet now, lifting the others from their cover with a single gesture of command. Walking wide, with fresh-loaded rifles ready, the troop converged on the huts.

Julian paused only to reload his own weapon, then hastened after the others. He saw at once that Amos had described the finale of the action as accurately as he had planned its beginning. Hut after hut gaped empty as they passed; at that moment the Hollow might have been some grisly village of the dead. The raiders had vanished into the heart of the swamp. A few had tracked down a horse and galloped to the forefront of the general retreat; Julian could still hear the faint crash of hoofs in the underbrush. Most of the horses had been abandoned as their owners fled for their lives. Already the 'whackers had begun to herd these strays into the circle of their own mounts.

Julian paused at the door of the shack where he had winged the black-haired marauder and recoiled in horror from what he saw, even though he was accustomed to death in its cruder forms. The near-naked black girl, sprawled in the welter of blankets and nondescript trash on the earthen floor, told the story of her destruction. The man who had just reeled into the night had surprised her in sleep—that was plain; tearing the clothes from her body like some obscene animal, he had violated her with brutal abandon. Then, all passion spent, he had smashed her head with his rifle butt. Apparently he had fired the hovel as he abandoned it: flames were already licking at the walls and twining hungry fingers in the palm thatch

above. Obeying a blind urge, Julian moved on without attempting to stamp out the flame. The girl was dead. Somehow it seemed oddly fitting that this shack should be her funeral pyre.

He found no sign of another Negro in the settlement and guessed that the former slaves (terrified even more by their attack than the assault of the thieves) had hidden in deep jungle, too, to await their departure.

Amos, rekindling his lantern wick when Julian returned to the tethered horses, was directing a casual funeral arrangement of his own. The dead had been gathered in a neat row just outside the circle of huts. Sweating at their work and cursing as casually as though they were handling butchered hogs, the troop checked faces one by one, tossed a dead body over a shoulder, and vanished into the jungle at the far side of the Hollow.

"There's a quicksand just beyond that cypress," said Amos. "Makes a handy buryin' ground."

"*Someone* must report this, you know."

"You been away a long time, Doc."

"You can't just kill men and forget them!"

"Askin' your pardon, no one's forgettin' nobody. We're even policin' up the Hollow for its regular tenants. Leave these carcasses to bloat, and they'd bring every buzzard in the county, come tomorrow."

"How many have you killed?"

"An even dozen. Like I hoped."

"They must have names."

"These ain't men any more, Doc. They're swampers. And they're better dead."

"You're sure you left no wounded?"

"Nary one. These boys of mine learned to shoot when they were shorter than a squirrel gun. A squirrel's a heap smaller'n a human skunk." Amos spat and fitted a fresh cap below his rifle hammer. "Course, if you're itchin' to be squire and doctor both, you'll find Black Lolly on his cabin porch. If he ain't dead by now——"

"Black Lolly? He was my father's headman."

"So I heard. Didn't your wife explain he's headman in the Hollow now?"

"Are you telling me that Lolly's dying in one of these cabins?"

"Trampled by a hoss, looks like, when he tried to stand 'em off.

As I say, Doc, he's dead—or dyin'. But you can have a look if you want."

A lantern winked in the dark, and the mountain man motioned to the bearer. "Take the doc to his cabin, Lafe—and stand by. We're leavin', once we're policed up."

Julian followed Lafe's lantern, letting the picture of Black Lolly build in his brain: it was vivid enough, though he had not seen the headman since before the war. Lolly was a Madagascar Negro, darker than most of the Chisholm slaves—and bigger, by a head, than any headman in the county. Harrison Chisholm had bought him from a Florida trader when Lolly was only a boy; even then Macalastair had insisted that Lolly was contraband, smuggled fresh from Africa on one of the blackbirders that still dared to defy the law.

But Lolly had tamed fast in Chisholm hands; he had risen even faster in the iron-hard regime of the Chisholm fields. A row boss at twenty, he had sweated his own squad of pickers without mercy, in the master's interest. Sensing the huge Negro's talent even then, Macalastair had set him to work in the gins, in blacksmith shop and stable, even aboard the river scows that plied between the Chisholm landing and Wilmington, so that Lolly might be ready for his ultimate post when the moment came.

Lolly's succession as headman had been an impressive ceremony. The Chisholm slaves, dressed in their gaudy best, had gathered on the lawn in solemn rows. Four hundred black faces had been raised to the portico when Lolly marched up to the step, his feet cramped in shoes for the first time, his store-bought clothes all but bursting at the seams from chest-swelling pride. It was the pride in that ebony-dark face that had shocked Julian most of all—and filled him with a shame he could never quite define. But he had stood back without a word as Lolly had dropped to one knee before his father. He had even joined in the cheer when Harrison Chisholm handed him the traditional glass of whisky that made the creation of a new headman official. . . .

Now, it seemed, Black Lolly—like the whole land he symbolized so graphically—had fallen on evil days. Like the South he had labored all his life to preserve, he was dying on his doorstep. Julian overtook his guide and laid a hand on the bushwhacker's arm.

"Why wouldn't he stay, Lafe?"

"Heard tell he was afraid of the bummers and ran for cover, just like the rest. Heard tell the rest of 'em followed him here and 'lected him a sort of king. Maybe that ain't the whole story. Maybe he just couldn't stand bein' free. Lots of 'em can't."

Lolly's cabin, though more sturdily built than its neighbors, was no less squalid by lantern light. Lolly himself, at first glance, seemed to be crushed like some giant insect on his doorsill. The lantern showed, however, that he had been ridden down some paces away from the house and, after the marauders had gone on, had dragged himself painfully to the only sanctuary he knew.

Blood marked his trail from grass to doorway; blood still ran from his nose and mouth as the wide bellows of his chest heaved with the effort of breathing. As they turned the body over, Julian saw the hoofmarks still plainly visible on the headman's shirt. No one but Lolly, he thought, could have taken such punishment and survived.

"Shall we leave him lay, Doc?"

"Put the lantern on that hook, Lafe, and hold him steady."

"But he's good as dead now. What can you do when a man's chest caves in and he can't even breathe?"

Julian ripped the shirt away without answering; the rough diagnosis seemed much too accurate for denial. It was evident that Lolly was already deep in coma; evident, too, that little air could enter his lungs, despite that sobbing fight for life. Even by lantern light the lips were almost as black as the skin. When Julian pulled down an eyelid, the inner side, ordinarily pink, was bluish in color.

The pulse, however, was still full, though accelerated beyond the danger point. Feeling it flutter under his finger, Julian rose with a frown and peeled off his coat. Heroic measures were needed if Lolly were not to die while he watched, but his mind still fumbled for a method.

The hoofmark, he noted, was deep-cut in the skin below the faded work shirt. At least it's on the right side, he thought—well away from the heart, though it's obvious that more than one rib has collapsed beneath it. If the right lung isn't punctured, it's a miracle.

His fingers explored the area, counting the breaks in the bones, testing the muscle wall where the pressure seemed most intense. He paused abruptly when the exploration entered a different field —a pneumatic swelling beneath the skin itself, a strange crackling, as

though each cautious finger were walking on finely broken eggshells.

It could be nothing but air, of course. Air beneath the skin, pumped there through the wounds those broken ribs had opened in the chest wall. He pushed the diagnosis further. Air beneath the skin in this area also meant a punctured lung. And a punctured lung spelled out pneumothorax—air in the chest under pressure.

The picture could not have been clearer with a window in Lolly's chest. Air, wheezing from the punctured right lung, was building a steady pressure within the cavity and had inflated the whole area as inexorably as air pumped into a balloon. As the pressure grew, the lungs had been pushed aside, compressed, until there was almost no chance for Lolly to draw even a partial breath.

"What's that knife in your belt, Lafe?"

"A real bowie, Doc. You ain't goin' to stick that black boy *now*?"

"I'm afraid it's my only chance."

The nine-inch blade already lay in his palm; he could see it was razor-sharp without pausing to test the edge. There was no time for details—no chance for chloride of lime or clean-scrubbed fingers. Either he must thrust the steel home—and thrust in a flash—or Lolly would go out under his hands.

"Bring the lantern lower, Lafe."

As he worked he was dimly aware that other eyes observed him; that a taut circle had gathered about the headman's porch, with dark faces as well as light in the silent audience. Thanks to the pressure beneath, it was a simple matter to tense the skin above the right breast, to slit through for an inch. Muscle tissue bulged upward, threatening to split the small incision; he squeezed the blade hard between thumb and forefinger, measuring an inch of steel as precisely as he could and plunging it downward, deep in that gleaming muscle wall. The tortured tissue held firm for an instant, then parted under the blade. Instantly he felt his fingers grate against bone and knew that he had chosen the correct point of entry, between two undamaged ribs.

The blade thrust downward with his silent prayer behind it. Something hissed sharply around the steel for all the world like steam escaping under pressure. Automatically he turned the blade in the wound, enlarging the slit he had made. This time the air rushed out between his fingers and the knife like a banshee's wailing. At that precise moment Lolly's nostrils dilated mightily. His whole chest ex-

panded as air entered the left lung and continued to pour through the windpipe in great, bubbling gasps.

Thank God the break was to the right, Julian thought. A knife thrust of that sort, made to the left, would have entered the heart.

He stepped back a little and dared to draw a deep breath of his own. The intent circle breathed in unison, as though waiting for his signal. Amos spoke before the sigh had ended.

"That boy was *dead*, Doc."

"Not quite."

"How'd you bring him back?"

The mountain man stepped up to the doorframe at Julian's nod; two of the Negroes followed gingerly, to peer down at the incision. All of them stood back a little, as though doubting the evidence of their eyes. . . . Julian tested Lolly's pulse as he explained his surgery. Already the beat was slower and stronger, and the flow of blood at nose and mouth had all but ceased. He had seen enough chest wounds to know that a man could live with one lung; the injured organ would heal itself in time if no large vessels had been damaged and no fever developed in the area. These were optimistic hopes, of course; they could be verified only by continued observation and the sort of care a doctor could supply at the clinic.

He bent close to the incision to test the rhythm of Black Lolly's breathing. An isinglass valve, applied to the opening he had made, would allow air to escape as the patient exhaled and close firmly when he drew breath. Knowing Louis's thoroughness, Julian was sure that equipment would be on hand in the surgery. No field hospital had ever been better stocked than Chisholm Clinic, he reflected; after tonight he could understand the need.

"We must take him back at once, Amos. Will you send for a cart?"

"Meat wagon's here now—with Noah aboard. Always follows us when we have a party in the Hollow."

Julian turned to the crowd about the steps just as Noah Heath detached himself from the group. A pair of stretcher-bearers followed with a canvas litter. No one stirred in the firelit circle as they lifted Lolly to the stretcher, though Julian could hear the shuffle of feet in the darkness beyond and guessed that the entire population of the Hollow, its curiosity exceeding its fear, had crept back from the swamp to watch. He had meant to go with the stretcher down the trail that

led to the turnpike, ignoring the low murmur of wonder that followed its passing. Instead he found himself pausing on Lolly's doorstep, spreading his hands for silence.

"I am Dr. Chisholm of Chisholm Hundred. Most of you know me by sight. I'm sure you all knew my father. . . ."

He had begun slowly, sure that he had their attention with his first words. Thanks to the burning cabins around them, it was easy to count heads in that close-packed throng. Including women and an occasional half-grown child, there were over a hundred Negroes in the group; even in that flickering light he could recognize more than one face.

"Black Lolly must go to our hospital tonight to get well. I can't promise that he will recover, but we'll do all we can to save him. When he does, of course, he's at liberty to return here—if he likes."

He let his eyes sweep over the hovels that hemmed Lolly's shack, then let them come back to individuals in the group, reading the unhappiness in one, the cowed sloth in another, the half defiance that smoldered in the younger faces.

"You know it's unsafe to go on living here. You have found by now that you can't do more than exist on what the Bureau pays you—even if thieves left you in peace. You know there's protection at Chisholm Hundred. Good food and wages—if you'll work to earn them. After tonight I hope you'll believe I'm your friend. Come and see me when you're ready. Let me prove I can help you. Let me prove that I need you—as much as you need me."

He dropped his hands and walked through the crowd with bowed head. Mounting his horse on the edge of the clearing, he cursed the impulse that brought those words to his lips. Blind instinct had driven his father's slaves to this hideaway; blind chance had permitted him to save the life of their headman in a way that most of these untutored minds would call miraculous. What right had he to call them back to his service, while the miracle was still before their eyes?

Yet there was no mistaking the rising babble of voices that followed him, the scuffle of blows given and returned in the darkness. Some of them were cursing him, he knew, and fighting to hold back the others. But even before he could reach the path to the highway he knew that more than half the group was following him as trustingly as sheep wedged about their bellwether.

There were tears in his eyes as he counted the dark, bobbing heads

that hemmed in his mount. His voice almost broke when he shouted ahead for Noah to slow the cart until this impromptu procession could come abreast. It was only fitting that his father's hands should escort his father's headman back to Chisholm Hundred. Black Lolly may live or die, he thought. Thanks to luck and a little honest wonder-working, he had saved more than a headman tonight.

"How many will we keep, Amos?"

The mountain man chuckled in the dark. "Most of 'em will stick, Doc. Specially when they've tasted the hot supper Roy's got waitin' in the stable yard."

"How did you know they'd come home?"

"Some of 'em always do after a raid. I figured we'd do better tonight—don't ask me why."

Even in the thick gloom of the swamp he caught Amos's rare off-center grin. "Reckon I'm beginnin' to like you, Doc. That's another thing I'll never square with my conscience."

X

Louis Rothschild was pacing the portico when Julian came up; the formal salon behind him blazed with light. Recalling his last words with his wife, Julian could not decide if this was a good omen or bad. He had hoped that she would receive him alone—or at least in a more intimate setting. . . . Even from a distance it was obvious that Louis was waiting for a word with him. Waiting so portentously, in fact, that Julian paused a moment in the stable gate before he walked onto the portico.

"Anything wrong, Louis?"

For all his pacing, Dr. Rothschild spoke calmly. "Didn't you think Jane would wait up for you?"

"She knows we're unhurt. Amos sent a rider on ahead——"

"You did a fine job tonight. It isn't that. Jane has something more important to discuss than a raid on the Hollow."

"Does she know that I've brought back nearly fifty of our—our people? *And* our old headman?"

Louis's eyes gleamed in earnest as he pumped Julian's hand. "We hoped they'd come back to you. Once you'd shown your face——"

"What's more important than putting our people to work?"

"You'd best discuss that with Jane." But Louis still held Julian on the portico. "Just remember she's been under a strain too. Don't use words you'll regret."

"In heaven's name, Louis, what has happened?"

"You went to Peabody, didn't you?"

"Of course I went to Peabody."

"For a loan to bring in your cotton?"

"For a loan to put the place on its feet. We've always gone to Peabody——"

"Times have changed, Julian."

"Incidentally, how did you know?"

"It's all over Wilmington, my friend."

"And why should Jane object? Why is it *her* affair?"

"As I said, you'd best let her tell you that."

"Thank you, Louis. I shall." He had already pushed one of the glass doors wide. Now he strode direct from portico to drawing room.

At first glance the great salon seemed ready and waiting for one of his father's formal evenings. Each of the three huge chandeliers blazed with candles. The Empire chairs and tables, the Duncan Phyfe highboys (freed, now, of their drapes) gleamed in fresh-waxed splendor. The Adam mirror in the far wall repeated the vision from his past to the last detail.

He stared deep in the mirror, blinking a little in the radiance, unwilling to believe that this reflection was real. The only jarring note was the man who stood in the portico window—an overseer, it seemed, in sweat-stained duster, his hair wild, one sleeve still bloodstained after a brawl in the quarters. . . . He smiled at his racing mind and bowed to the intruder, who was also Julian Chisholm in unfamiliar garb. With a thirty-thousand-dollar draft in his pocket and fifty fresh hands in the stable yard, he could face the future with aplomb.

"This room needs a hostess," he said, and smiled in earnest when his wife rose from the tall Queen Anne chair by the mantel.

Jane had dressed with care, he saw, transforming herself in a twinkling from field hand to chatelaine. Her gown was of sea-green velvet, puffed over white silk in prodigal ruchings; the bodice was classic, with a V that barely contained the bosom beneath. Her hair, rolled back from her face and caught in a coppery waterfall at her

neck, blended wonderfully with the mellow tones of the room behind her. She belongs in a fashion plate, he thought. Her eyes are as cold as any painted lady's; even that proud bosom can't be real.

And then the violence of his heartbeat drowned that cynic's sneer. He took a quick step toward her, feeling the breath catch in his throat. He had known that Jane could be capable—to the point of ruthlessness. He had known that her love for him had never wavered. He had forgotten how beautiful she could be—and how desirable.

"You're unhurt?"

She had spoken with a sharp intake of breath that matched his own. He sensed her anger and the flash of fear that had conquered it for the moment. Puzzled as he was by her attitude, he took time to be wary.

"Quite unhurt. Louis said you—wished to see me."

"I asked him to find you."

"If it's about Peabody, I——"

She cut in quickly: "I don't know how to say this, Julian. Really I don't."

"Say it anyhow."

"I was so happy, dressing for your return!" she cried. "That was before Louis brought the—the news from Wilmington."

"Tell it your way," he said. "I'll try to understand." He took another step toward her, but she turned away, refusing to meet his eyes.

"You went to Peabody," she said dully. "You didn't wait to—to consult Louis or me. You mortgaged Chisholm Hundred to that troglodyte——"

"The estate has always used him when it needed money." He kept his voice steady with an effort. "My father *made* George Peabody—kept him alive through two panics. Why shouldn't he help us?"

"Suppose I told you that Lucy Sprague owns Peabody's Bank today—and Peabody, too, if that's important?"

"Lucy?" He had all but stammered the word; he needed no glance at the mirror above Jane's head to know that he had blushed crimson.

"Why didn't you consult us, Julian?"

"Why should I?" The words were out; he knew he would have spoken them regardless, even as she blushed in return.

"Then our help has meant nothing to you?"

"Believe me, Jane——"

"Let me finish, please. You *have* been ill a long time. Legally, you're still incompetent to—to transact business with bankers. I'm still in charge here until the commanding general in Wilmington rules otherwise."

She's heard the mortgage is signed and sealed, he thought swiftly. Rumor has moved faster than fact, as usual. . . . I'll play it her way a moment. See how far she trusts me.

"Let me say one word, Jane. I know what you've been through here. You mustn't think I'm not grateful——"

"*Grateful!* Is that the biggest word you can find?"

"I know you've my—my best interests at heart. Now and always——"

"Then why wasn't I consulted—before you made this insane commitment?"

"Because I wanted the load on my shoulders—where it belongs. Because I wanted to give you the life you deserve—and the leisure——"

"Do you think I want to be—*this* sort of wife?" Her gesture included the lovely, finicking lines of the furniture, the opulent mirror and chandeliers, her own shimmering gown. "D'you think for a moment *this* sort of woman has the right to survive in the South of tomorrow?"

"You don't know what you're saying——"

"I've thought it out carefully. Granted, I married you for a—a reason of the moment. But I did learn to love you, Julian. I did see how much you needed—someone like me. Especially now, when the war is ended. When you're fighting a more dangerous war, for your own survival."

She breathed deep, then went on with mounting resolution: "I'd made a start here—with Louis and Noah to help me. Chisholm Hundred could have been a real model for the future. Now you've signed away that future to Lucy Sprague!"

She all but spat the last words, and he felt them lash him like a visible whip. Struggle as he might to pin down his whirling brain, he could not picture Lucy clearly at this moment. Was it inevitable that she enter his life again? Was Lucy the doom he had cowered in his room to avoid?

"Tell me about Lucy," he said, and knew that he had forced calm

into his voice with a mighty effort. "Why should *she* have a mortgage on our future?"

"Why is Wilmington alive with carpetbaggers?"

"Don't tell me she's *here*?"

"She called twice while you were ill. I showed her the door." Again Jane drew a deep, troubled breath. "Fortunately I'd already made my—my connection with General Harney. She didn't dare resent my rudeness——"

"You mean that Lucy's in Wilmington?"

"Since mid-July. Her agents were on the scene with the first Union gunboat. Buying all the banks they could—and all the mortgages." Jane flung up her hands in a gesture of despair. "Can't you see what you've done, Julian? Peabody has advanced you thirty thousand on a first mortgage. You'll never pay a penny on that debt if she can prevent it."

"Don't be unfair, please——"

"I've seen that woman in action. I know she wants this estate for her own."

"I won't let you say such things. Even if you are beside yourself at the moment——"

"It's you who are shouting, my dear. I was never calmer."

"Are you implying that I'm still out of my mind?"

"You must be, to defend Lucy Sprague."

"I'm not defending Lucy for a moment. I'm only insisting you give her a chance to prove she's innocent before you brand her."

Jane settled in the armchair, letting her hands fall to her sides. For a moment he was sure that she would burst into tears or, at the very least, ask him to forgive the fury of her attack. There must be a point of contact, where we can meet and talk calmly, he told himself. Can't she make the effort to meet me halfway?

"How was I to know that Lucy's in Wilmington?" he asked. "Or that she'd bought out Peabody?"

"You might have come to me before you plunged into this business. We could have gone to Vinson first——"

"And who is Vinson?"

"A loyal banker who happens to owe nothing to scalawags. He arranged the sale of my cotton——"

"*My* cotton, Jane!"

"He'd have helped us—if we'd gone to him together."

"Suppose I say that I prefer Peabody—even if Lucy's behind him? Will that convince you I'm insane?"

"I'm sorry I said that, Julian." Her voice had softened a little, but her eyes still blazed. "I was—angrier than I'd any right to be."

So you're asking my pardon now, he thought. I'll give you a chance to prove you're really sorry.

"Lucy's money is as good as any other Yankee's," he said. "Why shouldn't we take it—and make our crop regardless? Yes, and sell to the best British agent through your friends on the docks?"

"You won't go to Vinson, then?"

"I'm using my own judgment in this. My judgment says keep clear of Yankees when I can."

"You'd use my help," she said dully.

"You're my wife. This Vinson's another matter."

"What about Lucy?"

"All you say of her may be true. Granted, she's the widow of a Northern Croesus. She still comes from one of the oldest families on the Cape Fear—and she was my sister-in-law. No one can blame me if I accept her loan." He forced the next words with an effort. "No one but you, Jane—and you've no right to blame me. Not until events prove you're right."

"Very well, Julian." Her voice was still dead, as though she was too tired for argument. "You're in charge here. You must choose your own banker. Just remember, I warned you——"

"You'll receive Lucy if she calls again?"

Jane's head went up, and color blazed in her cheeks again. "She won't call a third time. Not while I'm your wife."

"Don't tell me you're afraid of her?"

"She's afraid of me," said Jane. "She hates and fears me both—because I'm honest. Of course that's something else you must learn on your own."

"I won't deny that Lucy Sprague meant a great deal to me once," he said, and he chose his words with care. "I'll even admit she came close to destroying me."

"You put things mildly, my dear."

"You saved me from all that, Jane, when you married me. Believe me, I've put Lucy behind me now."

"You told me that this morning."

"It bears repeating," he said, and held out both hands to her. Step over this crazy quarrel, his eyes begged. Come into my arms and give me your lips again. I'll prove how well I've lived that passion down. But Jane did not stir from her place in the wing-backed chair. When she spoke at last, her voice was still empty of emotion.

"I'd give a great deal to believe you, Julian. I think you'd give a great deal to believe yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"Louis and I both felt that you two should be—kept apart, until you were stronger."

He just escaped laughing. "Is that why you showed her the door?"

"One of the reasons," said Jane calmly. "I won't discuss the others. After all, I'm a Chisholm—I must be a lady too."

"Will you make your point?"

"It's your move now, not mine. You say you've outgrown Lucy. Go in to Wilmington and prove it. Meet her face to face. Ask for your money—and her terms."

He swung away from his wife, quartering the room in angry strides, pausing to steal a glance at her in the mirror before he faced her again. Jane was still staring deep into a world of her own; to judge by her measured breathing, she had forgotten his presence entirely.

For a moment he resisted a mad impulse to lift her in his arms. After all, he had every right to carry her up that ancestral staircase and remind her that she was his wife in more than name. . . . The impulse passed, and he fought down a still stranger urge to kneel beside her chair, to beg for the solace of her love.

Give me back your confidence, he pleaded wordlessly. *Stand by me until this turmoil is over, and I'm sure of my future and your own.* Aloud he said only, "You're quite right, of course. I must call on my sister-in-law now I'm recovered. If only to pay my respects."

"Tell me this. Which of us is the greater fool?"

"I can't answer that tonight, Jane. Certainly you've yet to give an inch."

"And you?"

"How can I give in now—until I know what Lucy means to do here?"

"You won't take my word?"

"For the last time, Jane, we must wait and see."

"Wait like the rest of your friends. Wait like a dumb beast for the ax to fall——"

"I think we've called enough names for one evening."

Jane continued to stare straight ahead. "You're right, Julian. I'd advise you to get what sleep you can. You must look your best when you—face Mrs. Sprague."

The clock chimed as she spoke; he stared incredulous at the hands and saw that it was four in the morning. Dawn was already gleaming faintly across the sky outside, though the tree masses that enclosed the lawn still clung to the dark. He struck fist to palm and quartered his drawing room one more time.

"Try to get some sleep yourself. I'm sorry we've argued so long."

She was on her feet at last, and her next words seemed wrenched from her heart. "Do you think I'll sleep until you return?"

"I'll be back by afternoon, I promise you that."

"Then you'd best go now."

"I intend to," he said, and forced himself to turn toward the door. At least he could pause there for a moment without losing face.

"You'll stand by, Jane?"

"I'll stand by. As you know, I'm good at that."

He let the reproach pass in silence. "Must you—go to the fields again?"

"Someone must if you're away. Mac's too old to leave his office."

"Your place is here—in the house."

"This isn't a house," she said. "Not as I understand the word. So far it's just escaped being a tomb."

"You mustn't think such things——"

"A tomb to the past," she cried. "A cave where ghosts put up the shutters and hide from daylight. You'll find them all along this river valley. Turn off the road at any gatepost if you don't believe me."

"I'm paying several calls on the way back——"

"Ghosts are only happy in the past," she said. "You belong with the future. As much as I."

"We'll make that future together, Jane. Just let me get my bearings."

"You've not much time."

"I'm aware of that."

"The Lucy Spragues are moving fast. Even now it may be too late to outfight them. And it's them or us, Julian—that's the first fact you must face."

"I'll face it in my own way, thank you."

He stormed through the door on that, hesitating only when he heard her voice, muffled by the half-closed portal:

"Don't join the ghosts, Julian. The South has too many now."

Storming into the stable yard, he wished he had thrown her the last word; the temptation was strong, even now, to go back, to curse her as she deserved. When he had crashed down his driveway at a hard gallop and roared into the Wilmington pike with the first light, he needed all his self-control to keep from turning back—for far different reasons.

It was intolerable to admit that his own wife could not trust him to make the simplest decision unaided. It was even more disquieting to find that Jane's last tirade had sprung from emotions far deeper than the fear that she might lose him to another woman.

Wondering how time had dealt with Lucy—and what armor he could use to face her—he found that he was urging his mount to even greater speed. Come what may, he told himself, I'll face this new South without flinching. Jane may go on doubting me, but I'll make my place here.

II

The False Cure

i

DOG-TIRED in the bright early morning, Julian slumped in his saddle as his horse trotted down the esplanade of Market Street, and closed his eyes against the city he had always called home. It was incredible that Wilmington had changed so little in the long years of war. Worse than incredible that Wilmington could open its eyes to a new day with its sun-faded elegance untouched by time.

His resentment burned the deeper as he contrasted the town's repose with the countryside he had just traversed. There had been ruin a-plenty above Chisholm Hundred: rich bottom land burned over to the horizon's rim, the skeletons of barns against the sunrise. On Bowen's Bluff, where the irregulars had made their last stand against the Federal gunboats, the wreckage of the Judge's mansion had stood like a gaunt warning. Even in the suburbs there had been gaping roofs and road blocks here and there, a kind of shuttered malaise that told its own story. . . . Wilmington itself was inviolate. Or like a complacent strumpet, the city had taken the supreme violation of defeat in stride, embraced the victor casually, and made him welcome.

Or so it seemed as he rode deep into Market Street through the mist of morning. There, just behind him, was the tree-lined park that boxed the spires of the Episcopal Church. (He would learn later, of course, that the rector had defied the Union officers by refusing to pray for the President of the United States; that the church, empty of pews and altar since April, had been a military hospital.) There on its ten acres of lawn was the white mass of the Marshall town house, a Doric magnificence that seemed untouched by war or time. (He could not know that the Marshalls had fled Wilmington months

ago; that the house itself, used as an informal rendezvous for Union officers, was even more deeply gutted than his own.)

It hardly mattered if a few proud houses were padlocked and boarded—the gentry of Wilmington were seldom in residence in August. He scarcely paused to note that more than one garden was as weed-choked as his own, more than one classic façade pathetic as a dandy in unwashed linen. . . . The city of his youth had come through a holocaust unburned—and, to the naked eye, unrepentant. At this dour moment he could hate Wilmington with all his heart.

ii

Reason asserted itself when he had ridden past the tall brick colonnade of the Hanover House and stabled his horse in the livery that stood between Wilmington's first hotel and the river front. Why should Wilmington be marked by war, when the city had never really been under fire?

He had heard of the capitulation in Richmond, when he was serving there in base hospital, a few months before Lee's surrender. Wilmington had been the last Confederate port to fall to the Yankee fleet. Through the whole conflict Fort Fisher had stood firm at the mouth of the Cape Fear, parrying the thrust of Union gunboats until the very end; that same fort had guarded the entrance to the vital waterway leading thirty miles upstream, to the city itself. Wilmington could hardly be blamed today if it stood serene, an island of plenty in the midst of a ravaged land.

Fort Fisher had kept this artery open to the end—the only Confederate harbor to receive blockade runners a full year after Gettysburg. Clocked at fifteen knots, these English-built racers had risked their very hull with each race from Nassau to the network of bays that fringed Cape Hatteras. At this moment Julian could smile a little in the midst of his new-found tolerance as he recalled his own sojourn in the Bahamas and the black-hulled side-wheelers that had packed the harbor of New Providence. He had watched them take their load of powder and Paris silks for the bombproofs, their shoes and rifle bores and Nassau bacon. . . . That last item, it was rumored, had made more than one Back Bay Brahmin rich on a short-term invest-

ment—for "Nassau bacon" had been nothing more than New England meat, transshipped to the Bahamas to provision the armies of Johnston and Lee.

But those images were behind him now. If the South had received a new crop of scoundrels to its bosom, who was to blame? Julian's eyes strayed down the slope of Market Street to the front and the frenetic bustle along the wharves. Even at this early hour the din of commerce was a jarring note in the sleepy repose that still hung above the residential district where he stood.

A casual glance told him that the docks had doubled in wartime and that more were building even now. In the clean morning light the spider-cranes seemed endowed with a separate life as they transferred cotton, and more cotton, from quayside to deck. Ship after ship (from trim Yankee steamer to salt-caked British side-wheeler and down-at-heel coaster) awaited a turn at the landing stages. . . . This, obviously, was Rebel cotton. Snapped up by the rascals who had thronged South with the armies, it was destined for the mills of Manchester and the Clyde. Fat profits were waiting for all concerned, save the original planter who had surrendered it.

He forced his eye downstream to the first cluster of pilings that marked the fishing banks. Even as he watched, a school of mullet flashed silver in the morning; a wedge of dories, their noses deep under the load of neatly folded nets, bulled down the channel with the easy current, ready for their morning haul. At least there will be fresh fish in the water-front stalls tonight, he thought, and let the thought die in the unnatural silence that surrounded him.

Macalastair had said that their greatest expense at Chisholm Hundred was the victualing of their field hands. He could understand that statement now as he contrasted the silence with the clash of hucksters' voices that had once been as much a part of Wilmington as the great silk-cotton tree that stood on the Marshall lawn or the spray of bougainvillaea that put out its purple blossom above the post-office door. Such was the plenty in the countryside, in those last fat years before the war, that any poor white with a mule and barrow could sell the surplus in these same streets between dawn and noon. The contending voices, offering all manner of food, from muskmelon to red cabbage, from fresh-plucked chicken to side meat just off the plantation butcher's hook, had made their own raucous music under the mulberry tree where he now stood disconsolate.

What was the source of Wilmington's food today? Some Yankee truck patch—or a Chicago stockyard? The plantations were dead along the Cape Fear: he had grasped that much in his headlong ride, without even pausing to turn down familiar driveways. Only Chisholm Hundred kept up a semblance of life, thanks to Jane's connections in this enemy stronghold. And even Chisholm Hundred must feed its hands from other fields.

So be it, he told himself grimly; even if we must buy our food and an outlet for our own crops, we've a chance for survival. I'll explore that chance a bit further—and try to hold my temper. . . . He walked deeper into the business section of the town, where the tall, grave-faced residences of the gentry yielded, bit by bit, to warehouses and ship chandlers', to open-air markets and tanneries and sailors' snugs. Here he found himself in the Wilmington he remembered—with a difference almost as heartbreaking as the genteel silence that mantled the upper town.

Commerce roared stridently in these narrow streets. The cobbled lanes were jam-packed with drays. Steam engines whined in every doorway as laborers bustled about the presses that were forcing up-river cotton into a shape suitable to the hold of waiting merchantmen from Tilbury or Glasgow. He did not need a second glance to confirm his suspicion that most of these dock-wallopers were white under their coats of grime. New York Irish, for the most part, he gathered, or poor whites from the Piedmont.

The Negroes were everywhere, the one anachronism in this busy picture, the one indelible blot on the prosperity that had set the Wilmington water front humming, from the meanest dock upstream to the maze of alleys around the ancient customhouse on Front Street. The Negroes sprawled in doorway and empty wagon seat and sunlit alley, happy as children in the cool of morning, ignoring the bustle all around them. Or so they seemed, at first glance. When he looked again they merely seemed indolent; their laughter, he noted, had a strident quality, especially when it was inspired by alcohol; their eyeballs rolled—and they still shrank visibly when a white man passed, as though they expected a whip across their shoulders.

Here and there, he saw, a few of the blacks were working side by side with the white roustabouts. This, in itself, was an unusual sight on that water front, where much of the heavy labor had been done by

white hands even before the war; in the days when a prime field hand was worth two thousand dollars on the hoof, he worked his master's estate. . . . For the most part, the Negroes stood apart, huddled in dark clots along the curb or shuffling aimlessly from door to door. Only at the gate of the Freedman's Bureau was there any vestige of ordered activity. Here in the whitewashed apotheosis of what had once been a tobacco warehouse, Yankee sentries patrolled with fixed bayonets. A file of patient blacks (from the sidewalk where Julian stood, it seemed unending) moved slowly under the crossed flags of the Union to the desk where the Bureau agents sat throned behind their money boxes.

Here, ducking and scraping like a badly wired puppet, the slave of yesterday (who would be the full-fledged citizen of tomorrow) shuffled from door to door in a kind of tranced stupor, jingling his weekly dole. Julian watched curiously for a moment, knowing that most of these men had never held money in their hands before. He was hardly surprised when most of them vanished in the nearest grogshop. Already he had stumbled over a dozen drunks along the cluttered street. More of them sprawled, asleep and snoring deeply, in the shadow of the Bureau itself.

"Your pardon, young man!"

He stepped aside, yielding the mud-spattered wooden treads of the sidewalk to a woman whose alpaca skirt rustled as she walked, whose spectacles seemed part of her outthrust nose. He saw that she clutched a stack of books to her bosom and guessed that this was a Yankee schoolmarm sent to Carolina by some Abolitionist society to give light to these freedmen. The Negroes within her range of vision seemed unaware of her presence as she rustled fiercely among them and disappeared around a corner with a last despairing cluck of her tongue.

Julian smiled as he watched her go; it was easy to understand the Abolitionist's recoil from her work, now that Abolition was a sprawling reality. He could smell the new aura of freedom, though his nostrils no longer rebelled. Last night in the Hollow he had breathed in that same dark stench without flinching. The smell of poverty, the sick miasma of fear. The stench of a terror that would not down, though the shackles of yesterday were gone and a man was free to seek his own destiny.

A broad-shouldered young black lay sleeping in the next yard, his head cradled in the lap of a strapping mulatto girl, his lips parted in a foolish, drunken grin. The Negress half sat, half lay on the stoop of the warehouse, her bare legs spraddled to accommodate her burden, her plump coffee-colored charms all but bursting the seams of her cheaply showy gown; perfume swam in waves from her person. As Julian watched she bent to scratch the young Negro's head and whooped with laughter when she found a louse, and then another, to crack between her nails. Between these forays she paused to drink deep from a square bottle that lay in the grass.

Julian stood for a long time at the street corner as the busy white world brushed by this tableau of degeneration, unheeding. He could sympathize with the Yankee schoolmarm and her instinctive cluck of horror. She, at least, had come South with a light in her bosom, a missionary determination to do good. Now that romance had been replaced by reality, she had recoiled from what she saw, heard, and smelled. At least, he thought, she had the decency to recoil—even to be a bit ashamed of the world she had made.

The wolves who had followed her, intent on rending that world for their own feasting, were not so delicate.

iii

He knew that he must seek out Lucy—knew, just as surely, that the turmoil within him would soon burst its bounds without some definite outlet. Yet he continued to wander—from quayside to the roaring cacophony of the cotton auction (held in the open air on the steps of what had been the Planters' Bank), from that war of voices to the comparative calm of Market Street. Idling under the dusty plane trees that fringed the esplanade, he stared for a while at the Marshall mansion, withdrawn as ever from this tawdry scramble for gain. He would have given a great deal to pay his first formal call within those cool white walls, to sit over a whisky with old friends from the past while he damned the present with all his heart and soul.

Marshall Hall was the only river estate larger than Chisholm Hundred; and old Leander Marshall, whose concept of grandeur was on the feudal side, had built this town house on a style to dwarf any com-

petitor in Wilmington. Standing at the massive wrought-iron palings, Julian found that he could admire its beauty, even as he was repelled, just a little, by its sheer mass. Though he did not know that the house was empty behind its great green shutters, he could feel the chill that stole across the lawns between the ornately sculptured box elders. A voice deeper than reason whispered that this house, too, was a relic from a happier time. Chisholm Hundred, for all its scars, was rooted in the Chisholm earth, an integral part of its destiny. The Marshall town house was only a memorial now, and the darkness of yesterday hung heavy above its tall white splendor. . . .

He turned away; there would be time to spare for Hoyt Marshall later. The whole South knew that Leander Marshall lay in a hero's grave. Hoyt, who had inherited the Marshall estate, had been a close friend of Julian's at the university. It would be good to sample Hoyt's bitter wisdom again, when he was calmer.

On the leafy sidewalk across from the old Masonic Hall he paused again, startled by the sudden dense crowd that had apparently risen from the earth to attend a speaker shouting from the balcony. The street had been deserted when he passed through before, wrapped in the same sleepy aloofness that seemed to hold residential Wilmington enchanted. Now perhaps five hundred listeners, almost all of them Negroes, had poured into the cobbled street, jammed the sidewalks and horse blocks, clustered like dark fruit on the crossbar of every lamppost.

There was nothing sinister about the assembly. As he moved into its midst Julian could not escape the feeling that most of the Negroes in the gathering had wandered here out of idle curiosity. For the most part they had a sheepish air, as though they were vaguely ashamed (and could not put their shame in words) to find themselves here at this hour for no useful purpose. And then he saw that the sheep had herders—flashily dressed whites, surrounded by an aura of cigar smoke and omnipotence, betraying their mongrel origins from the slant of their battered beavers to the grimy cut of their trousers. . . . Elbowed twice by the shepherds, he began to understand that he had no business in this assembly—and thrust out a sharp elbow in turn, forcing his way to the front rank of the throng, ignoring the curse of the man he had capsized.

The focal point of the assembly was the balcony of the Masonic

Hall. This venerable structure, built at the turn of the century, had always echoed to argument on both sides of its ivy-bound walls. Victories had been trumpeted from that balcony when the war was at its peak; casualty lists from the great battlefields had been read to hushed throngs of relatives as the tide of hope had ebbed. In its own heyday the hall had resounded to some of the most spirited oratory of the time, bellowed by some of the state's most eloquent statesmen. Julian saw instantly that the man who now ranted from end to end of the balcony was no true heir of those heroes.

The orator was young and loose-jointed, with a forehead more bald than noble, and blazing, ginger-red sideburns. Sweat gave his head the look of a freshly polished doorknob, and the armpits of his puce-colored frock coat were sweat-stained too. As he spoke he was constantly in motion from head to foot, shaken by a hurricane of passion that was both grotesque and frightening. Here, thought Julian, is the epitome of the fanatic: brassy-tongued, and slippery as a snake on a mud flat. A picture came to his mind unbidden: the prison pen at Andersonville and a hopeless madman screaming behind bars, his face veal-white, his eyes iridescent with hate. . . .

The man's words suited his wild gestures perfectly. Listening and swaying with the crowd, Julian found it hard to believe that such bombast could issue from a human mouth.

"My friends—my brothers! We of the North have shed our blood to make you free. To make you the equal of any man, black or white. And we mean to keep you free and equal—even if we must shed more blood——"

The crowd answered with a muted, curiously animal roar. A *ye-ah! yeeeee-ah!* that just escaped being a word, rumbling deep in a hundred throats. There was little real threat in that rumble. Standing four-square in its midst, Julian could feel no answering hate in these tight-pressed bodies.

"You want your rights, don't you?"

"*Ye-ah! Yeeeee-ah!*"

"My brothers! Tonight I go back to Philadelphia—to make my report to Mr. Thad Stevens, the congressman who works night and day to safeguard those rights. I would like to tell Mr. Stevens that you can ride in railroad cars today—in the first-class carriages—beside the white ladies——"

"Ye-ah! Yeeeee-ah!"

"That you sit in the white man's box when you go to the theater—not in a hole he calls 'nigger heaven'——"

Again the deep-throated growl that should have twisted a planter's spine with terror—a rhythmic, mechanical response that held no more real anger than the howling of a trained dog. Julian began to understand why as his eyes searched the mellow façade of the Masonic Hall. The orator, from his balcony rostrum, appeared to dominate the crowd before him; actually the Negroes were watching a man in the shadows below. This individual, a placid roly-poly in explosive checked pantaloons and a beaver with a crushed crown, stood on a packing box with a small American flag in each fist. Timing his gestures languidly to the pauses of the orator above, the assistant waved both flags like a human semaphore whenever the speaker wished a response.

"You know that these white planters treated you worse than dogs. For two hundred years they refused you the right to vote—or even to think. You were hewers of wood and drawers of water—you were oxen in the white man's field—born but to sweat and to die. That's ended now, thank God. Now it's your turn to rise up in wrath—to trample your oppressors—to seize his wealth and burn his mansion. The South is yours by law. Tomorrow it will be yours in fact. Soon Mr. Stevens and the other gentlemen working for you in Washington will see to it that you're equals—with the vote—with your forty acres and your mule——"

"Ye-ah! Yeeeee-ah!"

"There will be work for all—and plenty for all. The man who owned you yesterday will work for you tomorrow."

"Ye-ah! Yeeeee-ah!"

"But there's one thing to remember, my friends. You have yet to vote. That will come, I promise you. Sooner than your old masters think——" For a moment Julian was sure that the orator's eyes had sought him out in the crowd, but the man had merely paused, like a priest at some crude altar, to wait for his applause. "When that great day dawns, how will you vote?"

The flags waved in earnest now, and the roar was earsplitting.

"Republican!"

"Radical Republican!"

"Radical Republican!"

Julian let his eyes rove over the crowd again. Most of the Negroes, he noted, had stumbled badly over the last response, despite the stentorian prompting in their midst. With no real surprise he saw that a number of whites (most of them as down-at-heel as the man on the balcony) had worked their way into the press. It was they who had shouted the last chorus, bringing the other voices with them.

It surprised Julian more to observe a thick grouping of whites on the fringes of this strange claque. Most of them were as gaudily dressed as the rabble-rousers themselves—henchmen, he concluded, ready to move in at a sign if things got out of hand. There were even a dozen deep-rouged, high-flounced women in the shade of the plane trees, and he guessed that these were the scalawags' companions, emerged from their boudoirs for a breath of air after a late breakfast. A few of the onlookers were obviously gentlemen; in fact, he recognized more than one face in the half-curious, half-sneering audience.

Standing a bit apart from the others, with both hands jammed in his pockets, was a tall man in a fawn-colored coat and a waistcoat like a sunburst, a quizzical man whose face seemed anchored about an unlit cigar. The eyes of this observer (and they were gimlet-sharp, though they were all but lost in the man's swollen cheeks and sparrow-pocket lids) watched Julian as though their owner could not get his fill of staring. Even when Julian turned aside he could feel those eyes boring his back with the same cold appraisal.

He forgot the staring as the orator moved into his peroration—a final rocket burst of oratory with windmill gestures.

"Some of you are hungry, my brothers!"

"*Ye-ah! Yeeeee-ah!*"

For the first time, he noted, there was real feeling in that response.

"The Freedman's Bureau does what it can for you. But the funds of the Bureau are small. If you mean to exist, you must look out for your interests—*now!*"

"*Yea-h! Yeeeee-ah!*"

There, at last, was the mob shout he had dreaded: the voice of the many-headed monster, insensible to reason and yearning for blood.

"There is corn and wheat in the storehouses of your former masters. There are hams and sides of bacon. There are turkeys and chicken—and more fine whisky than a man can drink. It is yours for the taking, if you have the courage. Say the word and we'll get it for you——"

"Hold your tongue, you liar!"

He heard the voice roar out above the rabble-rouser's scream and knew that it was his own. Hands closed on his arm, but he swung free and stepped out to the clear half-moon of cobbles that separated the balcony from the circle of listeners.

"It's a lie, you fool—and you know it's a lie!"

Ginger-whiskers had leaned out from the iron fretwork of the balcony to stare at his heckler. Silent, he resembled a scarecrow more than ever; Julian had a brief picture of rumpled, dirty linen, of broken teeth in a corpse-yellow face. The eyes still glared, like those of a cornered animal. Once more he remembered the madman in the prison pen and how he had howled away his life, secure in the belief that an audience waited just outside the bars to hang on every syllable.

"Who said that?"

Julian's foot was already on the stair; a cocked fist sent the flag waver on his heels as neatly as though he had struck the man an actual blow.

"I did. And I'll say it again."

"Come up beside me and repeat your charges—if you dare."

He was on the balcony with no sense of transition; something in his face made the orator step back, though Julian could hear the fellow's teeth grind in his jaw. He turned his back to face the crowd, conscious that he had their attention, including the whites milling on the outskirts.

"This man lies when he says there is food stored on the plantations. All of you know he lies."

The Negroes nodded. Some of them even began the well-rehearsed chant, as though this were only another interlude in which they were to serve as chorus. He heard the scalawag rumble into speech behind him and silenced the man with a sharp elbow.

"Hold your tongue, I say. You asked me to speak, and I shall." He faced the expanse of bobbing, dark faces, spreading his hands for silence. "Many of you know me, I'm sure. I know that some of you belonged to my father before the war. You, Ned. And Peter. And, Sam, over there—don't hide your face from me! Tell this man if you were ever mistreated at Chisholm Hundred. Tell him if you ever went cold or hungry. If you were ever whipped."

Silence, he hoped, was answer of a sort. He went on, letting his voice fill the whole esplanade of Market Street. "Do you know why

you're hungry today? Because you're being fed on promises from men who have no answer to your problems." Again he stared the carpetbagger into silence. "It's true that you're free. But you must still work to live. Has this man offered you work? Can he promise you more than a dole and starvation?"

He risked a pause on that, and staring silence was his reward. He roared on regardless, heartsick at the vast apathy below. "There's work to be done at my place. All of you must know that by now. We're bringing in a crop—one of the first real crops in the valley. There are fences to mend and fields to put in cover. And there's hard money for any help you'll give—money, and a place to sleep, and food when the day is over. These aren't promises; these are facts——"

There was a soft thud behind him. He broke his tirade in the middle and turned sharply, realizing too late that the plump flag waver had followed him up the steps and stood poised behind him, a blackjack raised, his face frozen in a grimace of pain. He was in time to see a red-freckled fist draw back through the latticed door that gave from the balcony to the meeting room behind—a fist that held a cloth-wrapped persuader much like the one still grasped by his would-be assailant.

The whole tableau was both crystal-clear and unreal, like a snatch of melodrama in a nightmare. The red-freckled fist, it seemed, had hit hard; the flag waver rumbled down the short curve of stair like a smashed balloon, to collapse in the dusty street. Julian watched the lattice draw shut, save for a crack, where a pair of eyes stared back at him intently. He saw that the crowd below had begun to split apart as the white ringleaders converged on the stair well. It was his turn to move, and move fast, as Ginger-whiskers charged him with fists flailing. It was pure joy to split the puny, pumping arms, to drive a hard right to the midriff, to feel his fist go deep, as though the man were made of putty. He watched him go down with no need of a second blow, and turned sharply as a whisper reached him through the lattice.

"No more speechmaking today, Doctor—if you please. The rascals outnumber us."

The scalawags in the crowd were almost at the step, but Julian held his ground an instant more. This time he had no need to shout for silence; the milling crowd of Negroes was staring up at him, wide-eyed with wonder.

"You all know Chisholm Hundred. Come to us when you want work! Let's show these carpetbagging thieves that the South can take care of its own!"

The red-freckled hand emerged, fastening on his elbow; he permitted himself to be whisked behind the lattice, blinking in the dusty half-light as his unknown benefactor moved forward, leveled a pistol barrel through the crack, and sent a warning shot above the first head to show on the balcony.

"There's more where that came from, gentlemen," an ice-cold voice said calmly. And then, in a whisper at Julian's ear, "Follow me, Dr. Chisholm. Leg it, if you please—but don't lose your breath. We've time to spare."

Running from the rostrum to the robing room and down the rickety stairway that gave on to the high-fenced yard of Masonic Hall, Julian had time to observe that his rescuer was also the man who had stared at him in the crowd. A pallid, old-young man who was probably no more than thirty, despite the luxuriance of his side whiskers and the fierce upward tilt of that still unlighted cigar. There was no time to pause for thanks as they slipped through a loose board and ran up the alley that led to an ancient brick structure beyond. His companion led the way at a hard, loping run. Julian found he was gasping for breath when they climbed another stairway and entered a small, airless office heavy with the odor of printer's ink.

His companion bolted the door by which they had just entered, kicked a stack of proof sheets from a chair, and bowed Julian into it with a flourish. "I said we'd time to spare, Doctor. Breathe hard, then ask all the questions you like."

"You know me, it seems——"

"Everyone in Wilmington knows you—including the newcomers. After that little moment on the balcony, everyone is sure to remember." The pale young man laughed; like his voice, the laughter had a Northern twang. "Everyone knows me too, unfortunately. That's why I was forced to help you from ambush, as it were."

"I'm afraid I still don't understand——"

"The name is Saunders, sir. Paul Saunders. Whilom printer's devil, late of the College of New Jersey, sometimes known as Princeton. At present, owner of the Wilmington *Journal*, in whose sanctum you now repose. Obviously, I had no choice but to rescue you from yourself

just now. You've made a banner story for me this morning. If I handle you carefully—and keep you from killing yourself—I'm sure you'll make others."

The extended hand, Julian saw, was a bit ink-smeared. He grasped it firmly and tried to remember if this was the first time he had struck palms with a Yankee. "I'm your debtor, Mr. Saunders."

"Call me Paul," said the editor. "All my friends do. God knows I've few enough in Carolina."

"I know I was a fool just now——"

"You were indeed. It was still a cheering sight."

"You're a Yankee. Why did you help me?"

"A Yankee—and a nigger lover. Or don't you care for such terms?"

"It's a word I don't use, sir."

"Merely a test, Doctor. Please don't get huffy. I'm glad you don't look down on your former chattels. I'm even more pleased that you don't show your contempt with a label. Like *nigger*. Believe me, words like that can do more to keep hate alive than an overseer's whip."

Julian settled a bit deeper in his chair and studied Paul Saunders at his leisure. The editor had none of the fanatic air that had debauched the balcony orator, though there was a wild light in his eyes at the moment. Saunders seemed to be looking deep into a private cosmos and disliking what he found there. His voice was sharp when he went on, as though Julian were only part of an audience he meant to hypnotize.

"You did call me Yankee, you know. A milder word, I'll admit—and you tried to make it sound friendly. But you'll grant I'm still a strange breed."

"Can you blame me?"

"Not at all," said Saunders briskly. "We shook hands. That's enough for now. Later I'll prove how valuable I can be to you. For the present I'll content myself with a few home truths. Point one—you behaved like a model Quixote just now——"

"I've admitted that freely."

"Couldn't you see that those two mongrels on the balcony were paid organizers—for the Union League?"

"The Union League is a political group——"

"And the real brains behind the radicals. The leeches who are

clustered round Thad Stevens and his little gang of fanatics, waiting to start work in earnest. Not to vary the metaphor, they mean to bleed you planters white. The simplest line of attack, at present, is the Negro. Keep him off balance—remind him of his wrongs. Remind him he's unhappy—God knows it's true enough. Remind him he can cure his hunger in just one way——"

"Don't tell me you approve of slavery?"

"Did you? Did your father before you?" Paul Saunders held up a soothing palm. "Unlike most crusaders, I'm thoroughgoing; I looked up the Chisholm family records long ago. Your father, for example: did you know he made a speech in that same Masonic Hall advocating gradual manumission a good twenty years before Sumter?"

"We have that speech in the family archives."

"Unfortunately people like Harrison Chisholm had only good intentions—and no real political power. The die-hards won, as usual—and you now find yourself on the wrong side of a war. With a social revolution on your hands and no means of solving same. It's the fate of most humane men who make the mistake of moving slowly——"

"May I ask whose side you're on?"

"The underdog's, of course," said Paul Saunders. "Your unenviable position at the moment. Which means you've a real ally, Doctor—even if you don't approve the cut of his coat. Understand me, I'm against slavery in all its forms—whether it's a black man pinned to a cotton row or a white one coughing away his life in a Yankee mill town. From what I've seen in New England and Pittsburgh, I'm not sure the Yankee variety isn't worse. That's why I came South to check my findings."

Saunders threw a plump leg over his desk and continued to stare deep into his private cosmos. "Not too long ago—and I'll admit this freely—I was a confirmed Abolitionist. Fact is, I took more than one pot shot at you Rebels from our lines, though I was only a correspondent for the New York *Herald*."

Julian found he was matching the other's grin. "I was a noncombatant too," he said. "But I remember joining at least one cavalry charge on my own."

"Then we're even. Let me add at once that my eyes have been opened wide since I've settled here. What's more, I mean to stay. Would it startle you too much to learn that many Yankees like my-

self mean to become citizens of the new South? By God, Doctor, we're needed here—if only to convince people like yourself that we breed honest men up North now and again. Not all of us are of the genus carpetbagger——"

"Tell me one thing. Why did you stare at me so curiously while I was standing in the crowd? Surely I wasn't so conspicuous?"

"But you were—on more than one count. Our friends of the Union League don't mingle with their black brethren except at stated moments. Believe me, they're much too finicky. You stood among those Negroes like a friend—an odd sight in Wilmington. Then, when I got closer, I recalled you in earnest."

"I'm positive we never met."

"Take your mind back to a day at Vicksburg. A week before Grant moved in, to be exact. An angle by a mine crater, where Confederate and Union trenches were only a biscuit toss apart. Do you recall a certain Rebel surgeon being lowered into that crater to cut a Union soldier free of a smashed gun carriage? You wouldn't know, but I was cheering you from the other side."

Julian flushed under the compliment, even as he felt his nerve ends throb to that ghastly memory. "It was nothing, really——"

"You might say it saved your life today if you'd wish to be dramatic," said the journalist. "Actually, I suppose those rascals would have been content to jail you for inciting a riot. Shall we leave that thought in abeyance for a while and stroll round to my boardinghouse for breakfast?"

"Will it be safe for you?"

"Quite—unless you start another fracas. Believe me, it's a substantial invitation. I suspect my landlady of being an ex-madam, but she sets the best table in Wilmington. Even our commanding general dines there on occasion."

"I'm afraid I must call on my banker first. D'you happen to know a man named Vinson?"

Paul Saunders opened his eyes wide for the first time; with his armor down, he had a really youthful stare, like a schoolboy who has strayed beyond his depth. "*Vinson?* You knew Vinson?"

"My wife knows him well. I'd thought of asking him for a—a crop loan."

"You'd go to a Yankee moneylender?"

"After what I've just witnessed, it seemed logical. Besides, I'd heard that he was honest——"

"Quite honest. Or should I say *too* honest? He was found in an alley just one hour ago with a knife wound in his back. Don't ask me why—I haven't tracked the story down. If I said he was spoiling the game of the cotton crowd I'd be sued for libel—and rightly, too——"

Julian swallowed hard. He had heard his lips form Vinson's name with real surprise. Now that the necessity no longer existed he knew that he could not have gone to a "loyal" banker, even to end his quarrel with Jane. His mind hardened on its first resolve: all that he had seen this morning only deepened his suspicions of George Peabody and his connections. But he was still the family banker and he would have hard money on his counter. He would take that money and fight Peabody with his own weapons.

"I'll put it another way," said Saunders. "If a planter needs cash in this county—and what planter doesn't?—all roads lead to a lady named Sprague. Certainly you need no introduction there?"

"Mrs. Sprague is a relative, sir."

"Don't instruct me in your family tree, Doctor. I've climbed every branch. What's your next move? A call at the desk of our esteemed citizen, George Peabody? Or would you prefer to go straight to the lady who makes Peabody possible?"

"Very well, Paul. I'd intended to go to Lucy—to Mrs. Sprague—from the start. After all, she *is* my sister-in-law."

"A fair comment, Julian. In fact, it's a thought you should keep well in mind. I'm sure the lady herself will ponder it. She may be above the law, but she's not above criticism. And I happen to know she's socially ambitious."

"What do you mean?"

"Think it out yourself. There's still a social pattern here, no matter how a man has turned his coat. Your uncle Clayton, for example——"

"So my uncle is still among the living?"

"People like General Randolph survive most things, including civil wars. I won't mention your friend Hoyt Marshall. *He's* barricaded in his country place; no one's quite sure if he's alive or dead. There was a great deal of talk when the town house went under the hammer."

"Marshall Hall? It *couldn't*——"

"To Mrs. Sprague, no less. Prominent people all over the county are

saying she went too far; it was Peabody who foreclosed, of course."

"I intend to call on Hoyt today. On my uncle, too, if I have time."

"Make the time: it'll round out the picture for you. But see Lucy Sprague first of all." Paul drew a watch from the sunburst of his waistcoat. "This, I'm told, is the hour she breakfasts. Since you're a relative, you might be asked to join her. You may even be friends when you've left. Or something far more complex——"

"If you don't mind, Saunders!"

"*Paul*, damn it!" The journalist drew deep on his twopenny stinker; his grin was seraphic. "The point is, you need money; no one else has money right now but the fair Lucy. Get what you need, Julian, just don't leave your soul for security."

"I trust I'll come out with a little baggage."

"We shall see. I'd go with you if she'd let me. Unfortunately the lady negotiates this type of loan *à deux*."

Julian rose and offered his hand. "I gather she's not yet established at Marshall Hall?"

"You will find Mrs. Sprague at the Hanover House. Fourth floor front—the imperial suite. The desk clerk downstairs is a lout named Billings. Give him four bits and he'll take you up himself. You do have enough hard money for tips?"

"Yes, thank you."

"One thing more. When you are inside, keep one eye open for a man named Brooke."

"Brooke?"

"Jason Brooke. A renegade Englishman with a face like a stone. Once bodyguard for the unlamented Victor Sprague. No one is quite sure how he serves Sprague's widow, but Wilmington suspects the worst. This time tomorrow some will be saying it was he who knifed poor Vinson."

"I think you've said enough, Paul."

"More than enough, Julian." The journalist turned his visitor firmly toward the door. "Get about your business, my friend—I've a hard day ahead. So, God knows, have you."

iv

Julian quartered the carpet of the hotel living room another time, paused at the windows to stare down at the jostling drays on Front Street, paused again to bang a fist on the blotter of Lucy's rosewood desk. Of course she'd keep me waiting, he thought: it's part of the treatment.

The room reflected its tenant in every line; only the walls, he was sure, belonged to the ancient (and once respectable) hotel. From the deep-piled Turkish carpet underfoot to the lavish sofas, from the delicate buhl cabinets in each corner to the inlaid Directoire desk, this was Lucy's antechamber, and hers alone. Even the great stack of luggage beside the hall door was part of the picture; he guessed that those hatboxes and portmanteaus, those brassbound trunks heavy with Continental labels were waiting for transport to Marshall Hall, their owner's new abode.

He paused for a moment at the exit; even now it was not too late for flight. The craven impulse died instantly; he could never admit that he was afraid, even on her threshold. After all, he had expected to be kept waiting in just such a parlor.

He breathed deep in the faintly perfumed silence. Standing there at the door to the outer hall, he could hear the shuffle of a waiter's retreating footsteps, the pop of a cork from the room across the way, a woman's raucous laughter. Lucy's in her element, he thought. The whole hotel has changed as much as this room. . . .

"Dr. Chisholm?"

He turned sharply, knowing that the voice could have come only from the bedroom door. The man faced him there with cool insolence; a slender, feral figure dressed with quiet elegance, he held one shoulder at an angle calculated to block Julian's view as he pulled the door shut and stepped forward.

"You may go straight in, Doctor."

A renegade Englishman with a face like a stone. Paul's description was accurate enough. The man's accent was impeccable—Mayfair rather than Cheapside, thought Julian as he matched the cold, heavy-lidded stare. "Renegade" was written in every line of the too narrow, too sallow face—a skin that belonged to the night and its secrets, never to the candid day. Only the full, sensual lips had a trace of

color; they were still pouting in a smile, as though their owner shared a precious joke with the lady he had just left in the bedroom. Knowing the answer in advance, Julian asked the question regardless. After all, Lucy's bodyguard had come upon him unawares; he had the right to be rude in return.

"Who are you?"

"Jason Brooke, Doctor. Mrs. Sprague's secretary."

"Indeed? May I ask when you went in service?"

"When her husband died, Doctor. I have served Mrs. Sprague for all of four years." Was it fancy, or had Brooke underlined that last verb a bit too precisely? "As I say, she's ready to receive you now." The sneer that stressed the second verb was unmistakable.

Julian strode into the bedroom without a backward glance. Resisting the temptation to slam the door behind him, he knew that Jason Brooke had left the suite with his contempt intact. He sighed and leaned back against the door panel to face his ordeal.

The bedroom—a green cave, with the bed like a sultana's tent in its midst—received him suavely. He forced his mind to take in details: the precisely tucked counterpane of golden silk, covered with a heap of silk-stitched pillows; the breakfast table (bathed in a warm flood of light in the window box), where a coffee service steamed in the midst of a dozen silver bells. The illusion that this was more cave than room was produced by the green torrent of silk that descended from the precise center of the ceiling to loop at the shoulders of life-sized ebony statuettes in the four corners—matched nymphs and satyrs, black as the heart of darkness and naked as jay birds. He closed his eyes and looked again, half expecting to find Lucy waiting in the midst of that too-well-made bed, as naked and as chipper as her statuary. But the room was empty when he looked again—empty, and faintly perfumed and waiting.

A door sighed open in the far wall. A coffee-colored maid, starched to marionette-like crispness, parted the silken folds to bring yet another bell-covered plate to the table, to place two ebony throne chairs precisely. The girl curtsied deeply as she completed the task, and her eyes brushed him appraisingly. There was a faint twinkle in their brown depths, as though she guessed his errand all too well.

"Mrs. Sprague hopes you haven't breakfasted, Doctah. At least we ordah fo' two——"

Lucy herself came into the room as the maid was speaking, sweeping through her boudoir door in a foam of white lace-trimmed negligee. Her ash-blond hair was unbound; her small heart-shaped face glowed with all its remembered life. Then her arms were about him and her lips were hot on his—careless of the maid, careless of everything but his return. Lucy's hand closed on his, drawing him close, pressing his fingers hard against her breast. As she clung to him there in the silken center of her favorite battleground he could feel the wild thud of her heart under his fingers, sense that the lace-fringed peignoir was her only garment.

"Julian! It's really you!"

"It's good to see you, Lucy." At the moment the words came from his own heart, and that same heart was thudding just as madly as hers, as his whole being reveled in her nearness. Withdrawn—if only at arm's length—his mind would insist that Lucy was her familiar, eager self. His flesh (responding in a hundred ways to her nearness) insisted, with a logic all its own, that this eager girl was as vital as a man's hope of happiness.

"The war's over, darling—and we've both outlasted it! It's too good to believe!" She kissed him one more time with the words—a hard, disturbing kiss, full on the mouth—then drew back with a rueful smile, as though she half regretted that first burst of exuberance. He knew that these first moments had been planned by Lucy, to the last flick of her thighs, as she crossed to the table and settled with a small, stifled gasp.

"I thought you were never coming," she said. "Now that you're here, let me make sure you're real." Her eyes drew him a step closer, but this time he held his ground, with the table and the maid's quiet bustle like a shield between them.

"Dare I ask if you've breakfasted, Julian?"

Watching the maid uncover the plates, he was on the point of refusing; instinct told him that it was wrong to break bread with this woman—that he was here for business only, with no time to spare for the past and its dangerous embers. At the same time he could feel his head spin at the rich aroma of the coffee service, the mixed enticements of steak and mushrooms, shirred eggs with chicken livers. Damn her to hell, he thought, this breakfast is part of her play acting. Ground bait, to entice me deeper. He settled in the empty chair

as he spoke; the inner man had every right to this small surrender, since he had not eaten since yesterday's nooning with Jane and the field hands. That meal, he remembered grimly, had been chuck stew with greens.

"It's a pleasure, Lucy. How did you know I'd come just when I did?"

"Mr. Brooke was passing down Front Street. He saw you leave the *Journal* office and turn this way. Naturally I hoped for the best."

So Brooke was in the crowd outside Masonic Hall, thought Julian. Those thickheaded scalawags never guessed that it was Paul who rescued me, but Brooke knew instantly.

"I suppose you know why I'm here?"

"We'll serve ourselves, Flora," said Lucy. She settled in her chair as the maid went out, making a small church steeple of her index fingers and smiling at him gravely over its summit. "Serve yourself first, Julian, and fall to. I know quite well that you're hungry. I've always known everything about you. Sometimes before you knew yourself."

"After you, Mrs. Sprague."

"Still the Southern gentleman? Even though you come calling in a cotton overseer's coat?"

"The South has lost a war, Lucy. Forgive me for reminding you."

"Look at this room, my dear. Look at me. Have you or I lost anything that we can't replace?"

"Will you have steak or eggs, Mrs. Sprague? Or both?"

"I'll have tea and a slice of melon. There's rum on that side table. Take a little with your tea: it clears the head. Apparently yours needs clearing badly."

He obeyed her without words, feeling the hot, dark Jamaica warm him to his toes. Slicing a filet mignon, helping himself liberally to plump mushrooms, he knew that his head was still spinning, though the inner man (who had forced him so determinedly to this breakfast) was beginning to purr in earnest.

"It's been a long time since we've met, Lucy. Apparently you don't realize I've changed too. As much as Chisholm Hundred——"

"I know just how much you've changed, Julian—and I know just why you're here. Shall we discuss that grim errand later, if it needs discussion?"

"I don't suppose it's necessary, really. Peabody said we could have our loan. From what I've heard today, I must accept the terms."

"Peabody is a hardheaded businessman, my dear. What other terms did you expect?"

"I thought we weren't mentioning the subject now."

"We aren't. Tell me about yourself instead."

"You said you knew everything." He was devouring the scandalously plentiful breakfast as rapidly as manners permitted. "I suppose I should be flattered at your interest——"

"You've always interested me, Julian. In a way, you're a classic example of your kind. I, for one, think you're worth preserving—if only as a memento."

He scowled into his teacup, knowing that her smile would be more mocking than ever when he raised his eyes. "Is that why your Mr. Peabody granted me my loan?"

"One of the reasons—since we're being frank with one another."

"Just how am I a memento? Do I bring back the past you renounced to become a Yankee?"

"Please stop scowling. Try to see my side——"

"It's the winning side, Lucy. It's always the winning side. I've had ample opportunity to observe it."

"I'm still your friend, my dear. Or I could be, if you'd give me half a chance."

He pushed his empty plate aside and accepted another cup of tea, rejoicing in the new-found strength that poured through his blood stream. Lucy continued to smile with the lazy lift of her eyebrows that he would never quite forget. He added another ounce of Jamaica to his tea.

"Does a lady's offer of friendship frighten you so much?"

"You want something, Lucy. Wouldn't it save time to put it in words?"

"I want you to be happy, Julian. Will you deny that you're miserable at the moment?"

"I'm fighting for my life," he said. "So far I've had no time to wonder about happiness."

"You're beaten," she said. "Beaten and lonely and afraid."

"Don't confuse my future with my past."

"Your past, my dear brother-in-law, was something we never shared

properly—for reasons we both grasp all too well. The future can belong to us both—if we use our heads and play our cards."

He sipped his tea without attempting to frame an answer. So far their meeting had gone by rote: knowing Lucy as he did, he could have predicted her attack to this point to the last syllable. The fact that he was still on the defensive was just as inevitable. As she herself had said, she had ridden in with the invaders.

Across the table Lucy toyed with her breakfast and appeared to relax a bit, as though she was well satisfied with her advantage as of now. "You haven't asked me about myself, Julian. That's not too gallant."

"My picture is complete."

"Apparently you had quite a session with Paul Saunders."

"You know Paul, then?"

"Too well. So far he's been a gadfly—not too troublesome. I might add that he's an old friend of General Harney—did he tell you that?"

"Is that why you haven't fought him openly so far?"

Lucy took the question with composure. "Don't form opinions until I've had a chance to defend myself."

"My opinion of you was formed long ago. I see no reason to change it now."

"May I take that as a compliment?"

He rose from his chair as she extended her hand, and kissed the fingertips with the show of courtesy the occasion demanded. "You've swallowed Banker Peabody, Lucy. You're in the process of swallowing Hoyt Marshall—and heaven knows how many others. I suppose you'd like to swallow Chisholm Hundred too. Naturally that means war to the death. I'll enjoy it quite as much as you——"

"So you've heard about poor Hoyt too. Our Mr. Saunders has told you everything."

"I'm still trying to discover what you really want here. Surely you've money enough already——"

"Money's a strange weapon, Julian. Especially for a woman like myself. Remember, I outlived two husbands to get what I wanted." Again Lucy considered a moment before she went on: "I know this is hard to explain to a man. But I've wanted a man's power always. To use as I liked, with my woman's brain."

"I've said I understand you perfectly."

"And resent me—intensely. What man wouldn't? I'd despise you if you didn't hate me at this moment. That doesn't mean you must go on hating me always. Not when you discover how valuable we can be to each other."

"It's your life story," he said. "Tell it your own way."

"This weapon we call money. Don't you realize it's nothing but frozen power? Pittsburgh steel, New York real estate, or Rebel cotton at bargain prices—what does it matter, once it's locked in your checkbook? What really matters is that you can't have enough."

"I'm only asking for a chance to rebuild my home—to live in peace with my neighbor——"

"Including the Yankees?"

"Including the Yankees—if they'll pull out their troops and let us make peace our own way."

"That's what poor Hoyt Marshall was hoping for. Last week, as you know, I was forced to buy Marshall Hall at foreclosure when he'd drunk up the last of his loan. The country place will go under the hammer next. Do you know why? Hoyt chose to live in the past. To fight us with old-fashioned weapons——"

"So you are a Yankee!"

"I'm myself. I married Yankee mills and Yankee cunning long before this hopeless war could be fought. Those mills have dwarfed your plantation economy forever; that Yankee cunning is buying up the South in job lots. Say I'm one of the exploiters—I won't deny it. I could also be your friend if you'd let me."

"I'm taking your loan," he said. "I'm giving Peabody his mortgage. Isn't that risk enough?"

"Believe me, darling, you're taking no risk whatever. *I'm* behind you now."

"I don't want that sort of protection, Lucy."

"But you do want thirty thousand dollars to make your next crop."

"You can see it's a good loan."

"I could refuse to grant it if I liked."

"But you know better. You were once related to my family by marriage. The whole county knows as much. Just as the whole county knows you ruined Hoyt Marshall." He paused, letting the shot sink home. "You could ruin me too, I suppose—or try. But you don't dare go that far—as of now. Am I right?"

Lucy's eyes had blazed for an instant, but she controlled her temper. "Right as rain, my dear."

"Let me go on a bit, then. You'll give me this money to prove how right you are. You'll gamble that I'll ruin myself—and my land—in a year or so——"

"Less, with that starry-eyed wife to help you."

He ignored the feline flash. "I'm still master of my fate. I'll take the gamble gladly—and I'll outwit you. Can you bear it?"

"I'm a patient woman. I'll have Chisholm Hundred on my own terms—in my own time. And I'll have its owner too. Quite legally. Or didn't you guess that I've come South to marry you?"

He stared at her for a moment without speaking. It was obvious that she meant every word.

"I'd like to be gallant," he said at last. "But I'm afraid I'm more shocked than gratified."

"Many people expected us to marry when Mark died. Including your father——"

"I was younger in those days," he said wryly. "If you'll forgive me for admitting as much, I ran for my life——"

"Only because I wouldn't have you as a husband then. I'd made up my mind to marry Victor Sprague, and you couldn't bear the thought of being a part-time lover."

He sprang to his feet, overturning the chair in his anger. "Are you suggesting we resume from there?"

"I'm suggesting nothing, Julian. Merely stating that I shall take over Chisholm Hundred in my own good time."

"Why do you want it so badly?"

Lucy's lips tightened a little. "Shall we discuss that when it's mine?"

"Does Chisholm Hundred represent the one thing you could never buy—a good name?"

It was her turn to rise; her eyes were blazing in earnest when she rounded the table and charged him with a fist upraised. For a moment he felt sure she would strike him, and he braced himself for the blow. But Lucy's hand dropped to her side as the surge of temper died. "Perhaps you understand me too well, Julian," she said, and there was a strange note of pathos in her voice that seemed almost genuine. "The fact remains that I want you both. And what I want, I take."

"You'll never take Chisholm Hundred. We've made too much progress now."

"I know all about your wife's cotton deals; I know what you'll get from the ground this fall, to the bale. It isn't enough. Not unless you sell at top prices and pay no bounties."

"Perhaps we'll do just that."

"We shall see. In the meantime, I'll give you some good advice—so you'll have a sporting chance. Stop your wife's philanthropy—at once. Close that hospital and that free kitchen. Send Rothschild and Heath to town—they can be useful here, too, if they insist. And stop paying your hands in hard money."

"I prefer to pay cash in advance."

"Then you've lost before you've begun. Don't say I didn't warn you. Believe me, I'd like to see you succeed—if only for your own self-respect. Next year I could loan you enough to buy up the Marshall land. And the Judge's place on Bowen's Bluff. And Stedman's Knoll——"

"How can you be so callous, Lucy?"

"How can you be so romantic? Cotton must be a business too—a big business—if it's to survive. Can't you admit that the days of gentlemen are over in the South?"

"There's one question you haven't answered," he said. "From your viewpoint, you could take all this unaided. Why include me in the picture?"

"I've told you. With my money and your name, we could do anything we liked in this county. In five years' time we could own the state——"

"Are you in love with me, Lucy?"

"I loved you when I married Mark," she said. "I loved you even more when I married that mongrel Sprague. Naturally I love you still. It's the one flaw in my armor, Julian. Make the most of it."

Reason told him that she was mocking him, but there was no mistaking the tremor in her tone. Even an actress of Lucy's prowess could never quite counterfeit emotion. Or so he reasoned while he backed away from her challenge and tried hard to mask the fear in his eyes. A Lucy who merely toyed with his destiny was dangerous enough; a Lucy who loved him was another brand of tigress.

"Love's a big word, Lucy. Be sure you use it correctly."

"I know what I mean," she said, and again he was all but disarmed by her apparent simplicity. "I've tested all its counterfeits——"

"I could never love you, Lucy. Never in this world."

"You loved me once. You could learn again. I'm an excellent teacher——"

"I wanted you once," he said. "That's behind us."

"Is it, really?"

"Have you forgotten I have a wife?"

"How often have you remembered it since you entered this room?"

She did not wait for an answer but turned to the silken tent that enclosed them, parting its folds to open a huge armoire against the far wall. Feeling his cheeks burn at her last thrust, he was puzzled by her sudden withdrawal, until she stood back with a little smile to exhibit the wardrobe's contents. He stared hard at the row of satin-faced coats, the gleaming rack of boots, the bursting linen press.

"I bought these for you, Julian. Months ago. The moment I knew you'd come home. She dresses you like an overseer. I'd make you a Chisholm again."

Still staring at the bursting armoire, he felt his mind somersault crazily. For that dizzy instant he was back in his war-torn bedroom, pretending that he was surrounded by the old abundance, pretending that he could relive the happy past with all his senses. Then his brain cleared and he laughed aloud. It was quite like Lucy to make this opulent gesture; for the moment at least he could despise her a little.

"How did you know my size?"

"That was easily managed, Julian. I had them steal a suit from the estate. These were ordered direct from London—after I'd taken your measure."

"You'll never measure me correctly, Lucy."

"Won't you make a selection, my dear? Believe me, clothes are more important than ever here. Especially if you mean to call on your uncle Clayton."

"Is there anything you don't know about me?"

"Nothing of importance. I suppose you'll refuse my offer today. But I'm sure you'll return——"

"Good morning, Lucy. This has been an instructive meeting."

"I've been honest with you," she said. "I've told you all my plans for us. Why will a man never forgive honesty in a woman?"

"You know my plans too."

"War to the death, I believe?"

"War to the death," he said, and crossed the room to pick up his hat. Lucy stopped him instantly with a hand on his arm. A deceptively gentle hand for all the questing strength of the fingertips.

"Come back when you need more, Julian. I'll give you more——"

"I won't need more, Lucy."

"We haven't even begun, you know," she said, and put both hands to his temples to draw his unwilling lips into a kiss. Then, without warning, her mouth was a searching flame, her body an open flower in his embrace. Swaying in a kiss that seemed never-ending, he knew that he had only to carry her three short strides to the bed to relive all their memories. A revel of the flesh, pure and simple . . . Pure and simple. He roared with real laughter as that cleansing phrase—and all it implied—ripped through his mind. Then he lifted her, after all, and carried her to the bed, where he dropped her with no ceremony whatever, as casually as he might have returned a bitch to her kennel.

"Good-by for now, Julian," she said, and even on the tumbled counterpane she had never looked more composed or more inviting. "I'm glad we haven't changed."

He turned to go, leaving her the last word. At the door he risked a backward glance. Lucy lay as he had left her. He saw now that his angry hands had ripped the stuff of her gown. He groped for the knob and lurched for the parlor without daring to look again. Her voice followed him, soft as a kitten's purr and wiser than time.

"I'll wait, Julian. I know now that you're still worth waiting for."

Perhaps he had only imagined that final whisper. It might have been a voice from his own private nightmare, now that the nightmare had translated itself in a twinkling to this demonic reality.

In the parlor he leaned back against the tight-closed door while he fought for calm. At that moment he could scarcely focus on externals; it was not until he turned toward the hall that he realized he was not alone in the room. Jason Brooke, his stone-cold face bent over a stack of letters on the desk, was hard at work—so busy, in fact, that he hardly raised his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" Julian all but roared out the question, conscious of its incongruity before it left his lips. Lucy had said the

man was her secretary, and it was staring daylight: Brooke had every right to busy himself in the anteroom while he awaited her summons.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" Brooke rose coolly as he spoke. His slate-gray eyes regarded Julian gravely. The eyes of a gargoyle who knows the answers to men's prayers—and knows, just as surely, that most prayers go unanswered.

"Nothing, Brooke. Consider the question withdrawn."

"By no means, Doctor. I always work here in the forenoon. Until Mrs. Sprague is ready to begin her—dictation."

Julian bowed stiffly from the hall and went out with what dignity he could muster. It was too late to wonder if he had closed the bedroom door tightly. As he stumbled down the stairs he was sure that Jason Brooke had sauntered over and gone inside without even the formality of a knock.

Five minutes later, with a still tired horse between his knees, he was galloping down Market Street at the nag's best speed, as industriously as though the whole Union Army were on his trail. He had put Jason Brooke from his mind—firmly enough. Lucy was something else again, to say nothing of that heart-bursting moment in her bedroom.

Thank God I've my antidote waiting at Chisholm Hundred, he thought. Thank God my wife still clings to her blind faith in my redemption.

V

It was high noon (and the fine rain that had followed him from Wilmington had grown to a downpour) when he paused on Clayton Randolph's drive, uncertain whether to ride on. It had been a heartbreaking mistake to turn in at Bowen's Bluff and stare down at the shell of the Judge's house, its blackened beams a picture frame for the river that flowed with sullen smoothness in the rain. . . . It had hurt even more to pause at Stedman's Knoll and find only a boarded doorway with a sheriff's notice above the knocker. Now, studying the pylons of his uncle's gate and the smooth lawns just within the high brick wall, he wondered if he would be shocked even more by what he found at Randolph Hall.

The name of Randolph had been an illustrious one in tidewater

Carolina from the colonial era. The current general (despite a real tendency toward obesity) was already poised for the sculptor's chisel —a hero larger than life and, like too many heroes, rather contemptuous of the common herd. More than once Julian had felt sure that his uncle hated him cordially—especially when he asked a question out of turn. Today, of course, was a poor time for questions. Besides, he still had to look in on Hoyt Marshall, to make his peace with Jane. He shivered in the rain, letting his horse decide, and smiled under his dripping hatbrim when the aged nag charged the driveway at a respectable gallop.

There would be oats at the end of that white oyster road, and prime bourbon for the rider. Obviously he would have to endure a lecture—his uncle always lectured, even an audience of one. At the moment he felt it was a small price to pay for a much-needed breather. Besides, he was anxious to study a fat cat in its lair, and he knew that Clayton Randolph was an excellent example of the species.

During the war his uncle had served as a brigadier, attached to general headquarters in Richmond. Clayton Randolph had lost a son at Chickamauga and another in the last terrible holocaust of Petersburg, but had breathed no battle smoke of his own. Like others in high places, he had studied the war with a narrow but practical eye. Long before the great defeats began he had shifted his fortune quietly —from land to gold, from Richmond to London. Some even whispered that he owned stock in a Yankee cannon foundry; that he had financed a certain tannery in Philadelphia that had made enormous profits selling shoes direct to the Confederate Army. But these, of course, were slanders, and Clayton Randolph had shrugged them off with the contempt they deserved.

Still, it was no secret that he had left the war far richer than he had entered it. Others in the South had been as wise: from what he had heard today, Julian suspected that Randolph would have more friends than enemies in the Cape Fear Valley despite his shady record. Only Julian had witnessed his uncle's scurry to leave burning Richmond as the war ended; only Julian knew that a coward lurked behind that bronze hero-mask. It was a secret he could afford to keep; it would be amusing, in a way, to pretend that he had come here for help.

He reined in before his uncle's porte-cochere and sat for a while

in the saddle to study the familiar neo-classic façade. Like other houses along the Wilmington road, the Randolph mansion was tight-shuttered and apparently empty. But land and house were unmarked by war. Even from where he sat he could hear voices in the kitchen wing, the stamp of horses in the stable. However carefully it was masked, the house smelled of confidence, of righteous plenty. Without knowing why, Julian felt sure that his arrival had been noted; that he was being watched at this moment from more than one window. In the silence he could almost believe he had heard someone cock a rifle there at an upstairs shutter. And then the familiar Randolph stableboy was running out to catch his thrown bridle, and the Randolph butler (portly as ever in brand-new livery) was bowing from the stoop under the spread wing of an umbrella. With no sense of shock he was back in the older time.

His uncle received him in the paneled hush of his library—a magnificent room with twice the shelf space of Chisholm Hundred, though Julian had known from boyhood that most of these elaborately bound volumes were uncut. His uncle sat in his usual armchair, swathed in ascot and candy-striped dressing gown, his nose deep in a hot toddy, a battalion of medicine bottles at his elbow. The hand he offered Julian was liver-spotted and puffy with age, but the fingers were steel-firm. Clayton Randolph had always known the value of a good handshake, a flashing military eye.

"Julian, my boy, this is a pleasure too long deferred. If I weren't nursing a cold I'd have met you on my doorstep. A returning hero deserves no less——"

"I don't feel heroic at this moment, Uncle. Do you?"

But Randolph's eloquence did not pause for interruptions. "We who have seen action must stand together, Julian. In these parlous times we can do no less. I'm glad you've found your way here at last. You know I'll help you to the hilt. . . ."

There was more in that vein, and Julian let the florid voice flow on, unchecked. He's older than he looks, he thought; those cavalry mustaches are beautifully dyed, but they're really white; under that yellow mask he's shaking with ague.

"I'd have called long ago, Julian, to see how you were faring. Naturally I wished to meet that Yankee wife of yours——"

"She isn't a Yankee, Uncle."

"She behaves like one, sir, if you'll pardon my bluntness. Still, it seemed only fair to wait until you'd recovered from your illness—until you were master of your home again. . . . Mose, you black rapscallion! Where's the doctor's bourbon?"

Julian sipped the fine Kentucky whisky and made no further attempt to interrupt. He wondered if Clayton Randolph had ventured to set foot on his land while he lay ill upstairs, and hoped that his uncle had had more pressing business this summer. Amos would be quite capable of warming the ex-brigadier's breeches with a shotgun.

"Do I understand you've taken over your estate at last, my boy?"

Julian smiled. "With my wife's full permission."

"And high time, too. I've heard scandalous stories. They say that she rides with your field hands—on a mule, mind you, and astride, like any man. Of course I spiked such lies long ago. We'll have no more of that now you're taking over. And of course that black fellow must leave your house at once. *He's* real enough, damn him!"

"You mean Dr. Heath?"

"That's the rascal's name. I've met him more than once, bulling down that turnpike, without giving an inch to white riders. I've seen him in Wilmington at the army clinic, lecturing white men as though they were his equals."

"Wasn't that the basis of the late argument?"

His uncle paused, his mouth agape. "What did you say, my boy?"

"I only remarked that slavery is over. Whether we like it or not, we don't own our Negroes any more."

"A black is a black, sir. He was born in harness and he'll die there."

"Noah Heath was born free. He's one of the best doctors I know. I intend to use him as plantation surgeon as long as he'll stay."

Clayton Randolph gulped his bourbon and shouted for more. "You've always lived in the clouds, Julian. By God, you'll come to earth fast if you mean to survive——"

"I've done that, long ago."

"Some of us have taken steps to keep our blacks in line—along with the white trash that abet 'em. I know you'll join us when we need you. I'm so sure of it, I won't even lecture you now."

"Thank you, Uncle. I'm in a bad mood for lectures."

"I understand that. You came to me for something more substantial. A crop loan, for instance? Or money to restore your estate?"

"Peabody has promised to advance me all I need."

"Why go to that turncoat when you can come to me?"

Julian just escaped laughing aloud. "Have you gone into banking these days?"

"A group of us have some cash available. Believe me, we mean to help those who deserve our help. The men who'll put the South on its feet——"

"Who are the others in your group?"

"No one that you know. In times like these investors prefer to remain in the background."

Julian nodded gravely; the picture was already clear enough. A man who had sold Yankee shoes to his own soldiers would not hesitate to take a friend's mortgage with Yankee backing.

"Suppose I told you that I need ten thousand more. What would the loan cost me? For a year, say?"

General Randolph cleared his throat. "That's a large sum, Julian. And a year's a long time."

"Make it six months, then."

"I'm afraid the customary interest rate is ten per cent."

"Paid in advance, of course."

"Of course. And a similar payment when your crop is sold."

So this was the help that would restore the South: ten per cent interest on the lender's books, a twenty per cent payment in reality.

"Are these the only charges?"

"A brokerage fee is customary. Say a thousand on a loan of this sort."

"Ten per cent more? That means a rate of thirty per cent for the borrower."

"It's a bit more, in reality. We've carrying charges of between two and three per cent."

Julian tossed up his hands. The scalawags for whom this gray iniquity provided so smooth a front stood to recover more than a third of their actual investment on each loan, if they could find takers. How could he doubt that friends of the Randolph family would leap at the chance, in a state where hard money had been almost non-existent for five bitter years?

"Who are these financiers, Uncle? Men or bloodsuckers?"

"Money is hard to come by these days."

"It's easy enough to find in the North."

"But our South is bankrupt. And beggars can't be choosers."

"Then your backers are Yankees?"

"What if they are? Their money is legal tender. Do you want that ten thousand? If you do, you may have it at our best terms——"

"Thirty-odd per cent?"

"Thirty-odd per cent, Julian. Naturally we reserve the right to supervise its use."

"That's a big word to swallow."

"In your case, my boy, it's all too necessary."

"Why?"

"I've told you. There's widespread disapproval of the way your wife has conducted affairs in your illness. For example, we'd prefer you didn't pay the hands in actual money. Negroes have no business with money these days. It's far better to promise them a share of the crop——"

"Which they won't get—is that what you mean?"

"Naturally one must deduct food and living costs——"

"We feed our hands, and pay them too."

"So I've heard, damn it! How can the rest of us keep up that standard—when it only leads to bankruptcy?"

"Or better production?"

"Is this a sample of your wife's thinking?"

"You can leave my wife out of this."

"How can I—when she's involved you so deeply?"

"You've said enough, Uncle Clayton. And you may keep your loan. I won't tell you where to put it, since we're both gentlemen." He had not meant to shout; certainly he had not wished to bring that familiar turkey-red flush to General Randolph's wattles. It was sheer relief, just the same, to force the former bombproof into silence. "Remember that Mrs. Chisholm is my wife—and that I'm legally responsible for her actions. During my illness and after——"

"I tell you the woman is mad, Julian!"

"Then I share her madness—for her ideas are mine. All of them."

"Let us say nothing we'll regret."

"I've never been happier, Uncle. Not since I took off my uniform."

He fixed Clayton Randolph with a look—fixed him firmly in his armchair. For once the former brigadier seemed bankrupt of words or gestures, though he did manage a kind of strangled gasp as his nephew stalked from the room.

Riding down the rain-wet driveway again, Julian found that he was chortling from bursting lungs. It's quite true, he thought. I haven't been so happy in weeks; I've brought the battle into the open at last. Now I know what I really think—and where my true interest lies. . . . At least I need apologize to no one for taking Lucy's loan. Not even to Jane. An hour ago I thought that Lucy Sprague was the epitome of all evil. I know better now.

vi

Hoyt Marshall sighted carefully along the barrel of the dueling pistol; the hand that had trembled so violently a moment ago was steady as a rock. Julian braced himself for the report and tried not to look as dust spurted from the picture frame across the hallway.

"Another bull's-eye, Julian. That calls for another drink."

"For God's sake, Hoyt, say you'll come away with me."

"Why should I? This is my home—and I must be here when the bailiffs come. Besides, I enjoy shooting my ancestors." Hoyt Marshall lifted the pistol's twin from the case on the table and fired a second time with the same deadly aim. "Count 'em, Julian—starting at the stairhead. Already I'm down to my own century. Grandfather's next —old Leander I, no less. Then comes Leander II—my esteemed progenitor."

Hoyt was quite drunk—the sort of bone-deep intoxication that leaves its victim dead calm, red-eyed, uncertain whether to laugh or weep. Julian had found him thus, seated at a table in the great downstairs hall of the manor house, with the shells of broken bottles around him and fresh charges for the pistol ready at his hand. At intervals in the last hour, old Bea, who seemed to be the last Negro on the premises, had come forward in response to her master's bellows. Usually she had brought a fresh flask of brandy. Once she had returned with ammunition for the pistols which the heir of the Marshalls used so accurately. So far he had shot out the eyes of every

portrait in the gallery without a miss. Now, as Julian watched, he loaded and fired twice again, blasting the painted visage of yet another Marshall into blindness.

"We lost a war, Julian—but b' God, we shot straight!"

From the stair well to the wide-open double doors of the gallery, each painting now stared back sightlessly at the marksman, save for the full-length picture of Hoyt's father which hung in the place of honor beside the doorframe itself. Like Julian's own father, Leander Marshall had chosen to pose in his uniform between campaigns; hawk-proud and somehow younger than his years, the tall, too handsome officer still dominated the room, contemptuous of the dirt and ruin about him, and ignoring the raddled wreck that was his son. Julian watched as Hoyt lifted the pistol and drew a bead on Leander Marshall's forehead. This time the effort was too great; the last surviving Marshall dropped the gun and buried his face in his hands.

"Come into the air, Hoyt. It's cooler outside."

He led his friend to the portico, glad that the rain had all but ceased. The Negress followed them, unasked, with chairs and brandy. For a moment Hoyt stood swaying on his porch like a man in a nightmare. Then his eyes cleared as they focused on a spot to the north where the turnpike curved over a hill.

"They'll ride in that way, Julian. Any minute now. Guess they holed in at the Bird-in-Hand when the rain came. Scalawags don't like the wet any more'n a cat——"

"Why be so positive they'll foreclose today?"

"Since when has a carpetbagger been late with a foreclosure?"

"Promise you'll come home with me when it's over. There's work for you at Chisholm Hundred: I've told you that."

"For your slaves, yes. I'd make a poor field hand, Julian."

"You're still a damned good lawyer. We can use a lawyer in a hundred ways."

Hoyt sank in the chair Bea offered and wept quietly for a while. When he raised his head again, the change was evident. For a flash this was the Hoyt Marshall that Julian remembered from university days—the lawyer who had let his brilliance tarnish too soon, the cynic-scholar with a profile like a Greek coin.

"Sorry y'saw me like this, my friend. Meant t' put a bullet through Father's heart—and one through mine. *After* I'd surrendered to the

Sprague bitch, of course. Your pardon, Julian. Forgot the lady was once your sister-in-law."

"Curse all you like, if it helps."

"Wasn't cursin'. Was just *describin'* her. An' she's every legal right t' take over."

"Are you quite sure of that?"

"Every—legal—right." The lawyer's voice was steadier now. "I—defaulted on my interest. Twice. Couldn't make a crop to save my soul." A dirty hand swept the horizon vaguely, including the empty fields in one impotent gesture. For the first time Julian saw that fire had eaten deep in the land, from the turnpike to the house itself.

"You tried, at least."

"Course I tried. Spent my blood money like water to get the best overseers. Bribed everyone in sight to have a market open. We'd made a good start, too—till the bummers came."

"Are you sure they were bummers?"

"Who else burns for the fun of it?"

Julian paced the length of the porch to measure the destruction. "I see your barns went too."

"Along with the working stock. That's why they're foreclosing today. There was a clause in my mortgage—permitting a forced sale. *If* the crop was damaged beyond hope——"

"Were you here when this happened?"

"Oddly enough, I was even sober."

"You say these were bummers. Did you see their faces? Think hard, Hoyt."

"Now that you mention it, there was a leader. Thin, sallow rascal with a face like a fox. I got a fair glimpse of him just as they were riding off."

"A face like a fox!" Brooke resembled that predatory animal exactly. "You never saw him before?"

"Not in these parts."

"Perhaps you should get in to Wilmington oftener. Ever hear of a man named Jason Brooke?"

"Of course." The lawyer's eyes narrowed. "Doesn't he make a specialty of guarding Peabody's Bank—*and* the person of the lovely Mrs. Sprague?"

"Apparently these aren't his only activities."

"Are you accusing this rascal of burning my land?"

"He seems to fit the picture."

"Then why would he show his face?"

"Perhaps he was careless for once. Perhaps they've grown so callous at Peabody's they feel themselves above the law——"

"You mean if it was Brooke—it's my word against his?"

"Your word has weight in this county, Hoyt. And I'll add my endorsement to yours. Ride in to town with me. Look this fellow in the face and be sure——"

"It's a bit late for that. Here come the bailiffs now."

Julian followed his friend's gesture in time to see the buckboard emerge from the cloud of dust along the hilltop. He could see blue coats against the dust and heard the crack of a whip as the wagon careened downhill. Even as he watched, a light-wheeled carriage pounded through the haze and passed the buckboard in a burst of speed to enter the Marshall driveway. An officer was seated beside the driver; in the back seat two civilians hunched forward like a brace of vultures about to plummet on their prey.

"Bailiffs and bayonets," said the lawyer. "And a brace of bloodsuckers in the rear guard to ply their trade. Sit back and enjoy the spectacle, Julian; it's an everyday occurrence nowadays, but the first sight is amusing."

But Julian was already on his feet, staring down the driveway as though he could not believe his eyes. "Look twice at that man behind the reins, Hoyt, and stop sniveling. *Is that the scalawag who helped burn your barns?*"

Hoyt shaded his eyes against the afternoon haze and stared hard at the carriage as it whirred to a stop on his drive. It was good to see his fist clench at last, to watch his chin come up from the soiled shirt front. In that twinkling the alcoholic glaze across his eyes was replaced by a level glare.

"It's Fox-face, and no mistake about it."

"Those marauders were paid to destroy your crop, Hoyt. And Brooke was the paymaster. Stand up to him now—I'll back you."

"What can I do?"

"Order him from your place——"

"With the Army behind him?"

"You can do no less, Hoyt. Insist you'll file an affidavit in Wilmington with General Harney."

"What if he won't budge?"

"File the report just the same. That scoundrel Peabody burned you out so he could buy you out. There's bound to be law and order in Wilmington eventually. The first court that opens in North Carolina will take this case—if we bring it together. We'll recover this land for you—and we'll get damages to boot."

Hoyt was still trembling with rage. They both fell silent as Brooke sauntered across the driveway, taking his time. The buckboard had squeaked to a stop a few yards away; the soldiers (pale-faced boys, for the most part, who seemed too small for their uniforms) deployed in a lazy arc, enclosing the wings of the house, their bayonets at the ready.

The officer remained in the carriage, smoking a cigar in long, lazy puffs, a picture of varnished elegance in his brand-new tunic and bright boots. Julian watched, unstirring, while the vulture duo emerged from the back seat of the carriage and stumped importantly across the lawn—pig-fat scalawags both, who all but licked their lips in anticipation. One of them carried an auctioneer's gavel like a scepter; the other, who kept his hatbrim low, wore his arm in a sling. Julian had his second real shock of the afternoon when the man raised his head, and he saw that this was none other than the redneck he had winged last night at the Hollow. The world of vandals, it seemed, was smaller than he had realized—even in Wilmington.

Hoyt Marshall spoke out of the choking silence. "That's my man. Shall I kill him now or later?"

"Later, Hoyt—when you can do it legally."

As Julian spoke Brooke lifted one well-polished boot and placed it on the lower step of the portico. His eyes had not left Hoyt since he descended from the carriage. Now he raised his head arrogantly and stared at Julian in turn, measuring the movement carefully.

"So we meet again, Dr. Chisholm. Is that Mr. Marshall beside you?"

The lawyer answered without words. Screaming like a balked animal, he flung himself at Jason Brooke's throat, his fingers clawing wildly. Brooke side-stepped in time to deflect the full force of the blow, but he was not quite fast enough to avoid damage entirely. Julian watched Hoyt carom crazily from the balustrade that led from portico to lawn, and noted, in that same taut moment, that Brooke

was bleeding at cheek and jowl, where Hoyt's nails had raked the flesh. Then it was his turn to speak before Brooke's hand could quite complete its motion beneath the left revers of his coat.

"We are unarmed, Brooke. The United States Army will hardly countenance a cold-blooded murder."

His eyes nailed the smirking lieutenant to his seat in the carriage. He waited in silent fury while the boy in uniform lowered his cigar a trifle and favored them with a martial stare.

"What's the trouble, Brooke?"

But Lucy's henchman had already recovered his aplomb, despite the thick red flow at his jowl. "Mr. Marshall, it seems, needs a lesson in law."

Hoyt collapsed like a rag bag on the steps and tried hard to speak, but his outburst of rage had used the last of his strength. Julian took a quick step forward, hearing a voice that was not quite his own roar into the defense.

"Are you here to see that justice is done, Lieutenant?"

"Mind your manners, Reb!"

"Answer my question, young man. You seem of age—where were you hiding when the war was fought?" He did not wait for the lieutenant's blush to subside, nor did he heed the choking rumble in the boy's throat. "My name is Chisholm, if you're new in these parts. It's a name well known in Wilmington—even in your general's office. Must I repeat my question?"

The lieutenant had risen to his full height in the carriage. Even in that commanding position his figure was less than impressive. "I need no instructions, sir. We're here to foreclose a mortgage."

"We've proof that this land was gutted at that man's direction." He leveled a finger at Brooke. "We're offering that proof to the commanding general tomorrow."

Brooke spoke at last with weary boredom. "Look at them, Harry. Can't you see they're both drunk as goats?"

But Julian had already shouted the lieutenant down. "What's this man's status here?"

"He represents the Peabody Bank in Wilmington."

"And this man with a wounded arm?"

Black-mane favored him with a scowl, but the lieutenant's voice was smooth as ever. "Mr. Baker is here to submit a bid."

"And the man with a hammer—is he the auctioneer? Or does Peabody pay him too?"

The gavel bearer spoke pertly. "The name is Smith, sir. Horace R. Smith, since you're kind enough to be curious."

"I doubt if you were born with so neat a name."

"Doubt and be damned, sir. I still have an order here—from General Harney's office, since you ask—authorizing the sale of these premises to satisfy the mortgage held by—the gentleman on my left." The sheet of foolscap appeared magically from a coattail pocket. "If Mr. Marshall could revive enough to sign, it would simplify matters greatly."

"When will the sale be held?"

Brooke looked from Julian to the lieutenant and shrugged. "Perhaps you'd like to deploy your men, Harry. Everything here is ours, to auction as we like; we're agreed on that point."

"Emphatically," said the youth in uniform, and bounced from carriage to lawn.

"Then isn't it your duty to nail down what you find?"

"I see your point, Mr. Brooke," said the lieutenant, and barked an order to the half circle of bayonet-proud Army that still enclosed the Marshall lawn. The Army formed instantly into a double column and vanished in the direction of the stables. The lieutenant brought up the rear with a flourish and paused to salute the group on the portico before he vanished in turn.

"Sure you can handle this, Brooke?"

"Your servant, Lieutenant; I'll see you later."

Hoyt Marshall pulled himself upright with an effort as Brooke took the last final step toward the portico. "I warned you once, sir——"

"You've uttered your last warning, Mr. Marshall," said Brooke, and his voice was almost gentle now. "The same goes for you, Dr. Chisholm, since you're unwise enough to interfere. Will your friend sign this paper—and go quietly?"

"What happens if we don't?"

"I'm not quite sure. But I should remind you that Mr. Baker and I are armed—while you are not."

"So it's Mr. Baker now? Do you give that title to every red-neck thief on your side?"

Black-mane bellowed instantly at the taunt. "So it was you who

winged me last night? I thought as much——" He was on the portico with the words, and a knife blade had thrust from his sleeve like a snake's tongue. Brooke, with a shrug, converged from the other side as Hoyt Marshall weaved to his feet and stood with both fists cocked.

At that moment Julian felt a light pressure at his side and dared a glance over his shoulder. It was old Bea, he saw, ghosted out of nowhere, with a cocked dueling pistol between her palms. Without daring a second glance he knew that Hoyt was already armed and that the lawyer stood ready, with the long-barreled weapon fanned down at his side. It was the correct pose for the duelist—or the landowner defending his acres.

"Set foot on this step, Mr. Brooke, and you're cold mutton."

"I've every legal right——"

"You've no more right than Beelzebub." At the moment the comparison was apt enough; Brooke's face had gone from gray to white at the threat, but it was rage that drained his cheeks, not fear. Julian watched the renegade's finger itch for the pistol just inside his coat and knew he had made a lifelong enemy.

Thinking it was Bea, he did not stir as he heard a footfall just behind him. Too late, he caught the glint of triumph in Brooke's eyes and whirled on his toes just as the blow descended. A pistol barked, and he knew that Hoyt had fired in the split second before he, too, was overcome. Then darkness blotted the porch from view.

vii

Even as his mind swam back, he knew that he had been sandbagged expertly enough just behind one ear; with no real surprise, he stared up at the sunburned face of Amos Martin. Amos, he felt sure, had been sent by a special providence to rescue him.

When he looked again he saw that the bushwhacker's head and shoulders were dappled by the light-and-shadow pattern of a great umbrella tree—the tree that had always stood beside the Marshall landing stage, on the riverbank. Just beyond, Hoyt loomed in silhouette against a clear afternoon sky. The lawyer was in the act of breaking out the jib on a sloop anchored to the stringpiece. Hearing the stamp of hoofs on the bank above and the low-voiced talk of

Amos's troop, Julian could guess how the bushwhacker leader had arrived.

Amos said casually, "Try sittin' up, Doc. 'Twasn't a bad tap. Didn't even break the skin——"

"How did it happen?"

The mountain man nodded toward Hoyt Marshall. "Next time you gentlemen want to play hero, stand back to back. You won't get rushed from behind."

The lawyer came up the landing as Amos spoke; he grinned ruefully as he sat down on the stringpiece beside Julian. "Amos has taught me a great deal this past hour. You might even say we've become friends while we waited for you to come round."

"Tell me just what happened."

"Scoundrels never work singly. Not if they're as slippery as our Mr. Brooke. It seems another wagon cut into my land by the work road. Seems they came into the house by the service doors without a by-your-leave. One of them jumped on your back just as you were daring Brooke to step up on the portico. At that precise moment another was knocking my pistol from my hand——"

"You're quite unhurt?"

"Indeed yes. All they wanted from *me* was a signature on that bill of sale." Hoyt smiled again and spread his hands in a gesture of finality. "All I wanted from *them* was a promise not to beat you to a pulp. Brooke was primed to do just that. As you see, we struck a bargain."

"Where's Brooke now?"

"Gone back to Wilmington, with the last Marshall acre in his pocket. Amos rode up before their dust had settled."

Julian rose in earnest; save for a faint buzzing behind his eyes, he felt almost normal. "What's wrong, Amos?"

"Nothin' at all, Doc. Just figured I might save your lady a little worry."

Julian found that his scowl was changing to a grin. It was annoying that Amos should see fit to pick up his trail across half a county, as though he were a wayward schoolboy. If Jane were really worried he could overlook the mountain man's pursuit.

"She expected you home hours ago," said Amos. "Sent me down the pike for a look-see. When I heard those scalawag carts rattle away I figured you might be givin' your friend here a hand." He grinned in

turn. "Not that we could have mixed in, with bluecoats on his land. There's too many more where they came from."

"The same thought has crossed my mind, Amos," said Hoyt. "That's why I brought my sloop downstream. Since I've no longer a home, I can at least sleep aboard."

"You'll sleep better at Chisholm Hundred," said Julian. "You can even ferry me there. Where's Bea?"

"On her way to the Hundred now, to ask for work," said Hoyt. "If her former master weren't so proud, he'd do the same."

"How often must I say you're welcome?"

The lawyer turned away, then faced Julian steadily enough. "You may not believe it, but tangling horns with those carpetbaggers has given me the will to live again. Provided, of course, I can be useful."

"Come home with us, Hoyt. Find out just how useful you can be."

Hoyt glanced at the mountain man. "Do you endorse that offer, Amos?"

"Course we can use you. God help you, Mr. Marshall, we'll even teach you to work with your hands."

The lawyer spread his hands for inspection, palms up. "They are good hands, you know. Right now I'd like to use them to choke a few scalawags. But that can come later."

"For a start," said Julian, "you can file copies of that affidavit on Jason Brooke. One with General Harney, another with Paul Saunders' newspaper. Then you can help Macalastair with his accounts: he'll need help, with fifty new men in the fields."

"Can you picture me pushing a quill?"

"Easily. As I recall, you starred in math at the university. You'll also be worth your weight in cotton when it's time to market the crops. I know how many friends you have in Wilmington."

"Most of them are dead."

"You'll make others, damn you. That's a knack you'll never lose. All you've really lost is your nerve—and that's coming back fast. I can think of worse jobs these days than head cotton factor for Chisholm Hundred."

Hoyt's chin came up. "You've got a new hand, Julian. Let's pray he doesn't let you down." He winked at Amos. "If I ferry you home this evening, do I go straight on Mac's pay roll?"

"You're on his pay roll now."

It was good to watch Hoyt Marshall's easy smile—a kind of relaxation that seemed to spread to his fingertips when he loosened the moorings of the sloop and bowed Julian into the stern sheets with a flourish. It was good to observe the hard line of his jaw, the almost arrogant tilt of his head as he prepared to cast off, without a backward glance for the home he was leaving. . . . He's gone through the fire, thought Julian, and come out a better man; he'll thank me for that tempering when his mind has settled.

Amos lifted his rifle into the bow and settled beside the mast. "Hope you gentlemen don't mind a passenger. It's safer to have a guard aboard."

"Even in broad daylight?"

"It's a better light to shoot by, Doc. Hit the channel on your first tack, Mr. Marshall, and stay far out. I'll keep a weather eye——"

They sailed downstream in an oddly comforting silence, holding a steady course that utilized the current of the river itself and an easy following breeze. No one spoke for a long time: after that bizarre encounter on the Marshall portico there was no further need for speech.

The bushwhacker troop paralleled their course for a while, then vanished in a tangle of bottom land as the road turned from the water. Already, Julian noted, they were less than a mile from the Chisholm landing. He tried hard not to brood on his impending meeting with Jane.

The last shouted words of their quarrel echoed all too vividly in his ears. Was Jane merely waiting to resume it? He had seen Lucy and come through with a victory of sorts—would she take his word for that?

Above all, could they bury their quarrel deep and work together like friends—with the threat of Lucy's power hanging overhead?

He made no attempt to answer those questions now; it was far simpler to keep his eye on the dark smudge of shore line as the river widened into a pale blue bay and Hoyt took full advantage of the breeze to skim downstream like a homing gull. Even at this distance Julian could pick out landmarks—the low green curve of a hillside ringed with water oaks, a row of poplars that marked the property line of the Bowen estate. Another bend in the river, and he would sight his own chimney tops. . . . Hoyt spoke softly above the quiet murmur of the tide.

"Bea went down the wood road on muleback. I hope she's warned your wife that I'm coming."

"Jane will welcome you," he answered, and hoped that he had put conviction into the words.

"Jane and I are friends already," said Hoyt. "Or perhaps I should say friendly enemies."

"You've called at Chisholm Hundred?"

"More than once while you were ill. I've fought that wife of yours to a standstill—and vice versa. The same goes double for your brace of doctors. Stop me if I'm wrong, Julian, but you can use a cynic in your midst."

"Why else would I bring you home?"

"I'll tell you more. Your wife *will* welcome me—if not with open arms. Jane Chisholm enjoys a fight as much as anyone. Fists, bullets—or words. In fact, if your eyes are as sharp as mine, you'll observe that she's awaiting us now—on the ancestral portico."

The sloop had glided past the high, stony promontory that marked his upstream boundary. Now, as Hoyt ran smartly before the fresh afternoon breeze, the Chisholm land and the mansion itself were in plain view. Bathed in the golden light of afternoon, the man-made hill and the great house that crowned it seemed permanent as earth itself. This is my land and my home, his whole being shouted. My wife is waiting on the portico at the day's end, and I've the means to keep her there. What more can a man ask for his destiny?

"Stand by to make fast," said Hoyt.

The mountain man went ashore with the stiff-legged awkwardness of the landsman and fumbled the forward painter fast. Julian was at his heels before the sloop could touch the bank; he broke into a hard run along the landing stage and straight up to the slope beyond.

He saw Jane rise from her chair on the portico and start forward. Too late, he recalled the bitter note that had marked their parting. But he could no more restrain his exuberance than he could slow his racing legs. She was wearing the white calico dress he remembered so well; her hair, bound in its familiar braid, seemed to capture all the sun's gold. He let his heart go forward to meet her, without words or need of words. And then, as she paused abruptly, he saw that she was remembering their quarrel too.

"I've done what I said I'd do," he whispered, and it was an effort to

keep from shouting. If she fails to understand me now, he thought, I'm lost. The tumult of the long, weary day receded before his need for her. Here, at long last, is the refuge I've been seeking, he told himself; here, the antidote for today's bitterness. . . . The same new-found wisdom held him rooted to the spot. Like all havens after storm, like happiness itself, Jane Chisholm must be earned. Until he had proved himself, until he had conquered Lucy Sprague and all that Lucy symbolized, he had no right to take that yearned-for step. No right to touch his wife's hand—until she gave it freely.

Jane's voice brought him back, and she had whispered, too, though they still stood alone on the vast weedy lawn.

"I know what you've done, Julian."

"How could you know?"

"I sent Noah to Wilmington," she said. "Did you think I could get through the day—*without* knowing?"

"Do you blame me still?"

"I heard about Vinson too. I know you had no choice——"

"No choice at all," he said, unwilling to press the advantage yet.

"I can see that now, my dear. Will you forgive me for being too—too angry to see it yesterday?"

Still he held his ground. "You might ask me how I passed my day. And what terms I made."

"You've come back," she said. "You still belong here. I can read that much in your eyes, Julian. What does the rest matter now?"

"We'll fight her together," he said, and it hardly mattered if he all but shouted now. "It's Lucy or us, Jane. I can thank you for that knowledge too."

She came to him as he spoke, and lifted her lips; they kissed there in the weedy garden in the high, brave glow of afternoon. It's still a truce, he thought. I've still to prove myself. But I've come home again and I've found my wife waiting. That discovery will do nicely for now.

"Hoyt can have the east bedroom," she said. "Masons are coming tomorrow to close the wall; we can afford stonemasons now."

"You're giving him my room, Jane?"

"It was your room, my dear. I'm moving your things and mine to the south wing. After today we've earned a suite of our own."

There was no coquetry in her words and no hint of passion: she

had spoken calmly, as though they had shared a room for years—and a bed. And yet he could feel her fingers tighten within his own, as though an invisible current had passed between them. Then she turned, with their hands still clasped, to smile at Hoyt Marshall as the newcomer crossed the lawn.

"Welcome to Chisholm Hundred, Hoyt."

Julian felt the breath catch in his throat. No lady of the old school could have offered her hand to Hoyt Marshall's lips with more fluent grace. Hoyt's own bow (which should have been grotesque under that layer of dirt and sloth) rose to the occasion perfectly.

"You see my point, Julian? She makes you at home with a word."

"You may save the compliments till later," said Jane.

"We'll be at each other's throat soon enough."

"And the fighting—if you insist that we fight. Go straight to the east bedroom and dress for dinner. Bea has laid out your things. I'm sorry we haven't a personal valet, but these are hard times."

"So I'm told," said Hoyt with a small, grave smile. "I'll manage nicely, Mrs. Chisholm."

"You've always managed nicely, Hoyt," said Jane. "Why should you fail yourself now?"

They joined arms on that and turned to the portico. Julian found that he had taken his wife's free arm with no pause for thought. In the old days no lady would have linked arms with a visitor in the midst of her lawn. A lady of her mother's school would have waited on the portico—serenely, in the midst of her daughters and her lesser menfolk—for the visitor's formal presentation. He could hardly quarrel with Jane or Jane's casual acceptance. He could even afford to swing in step with her and laugh at Hoyt's next joke. To risk a joke of his own—and blink, just a little, when he found he was laughing in rhythm with the others.

viii

Hoyt rose on his varnished toes with the aplomb of a ballet dancer about to risk an *entre-chat*; the lawyer's eyes (wide-open now, for all the wine he had drunk at dinner) studied his reflection carefully in the Adam mirror before he settled again and bowed deep to his hostess.

"One thing I still don't understand, Jane—may I call you Jane now that I'm one of the family, once removed?"

"You always have, Hoyt."

"Why do I find a complete wardrobe awaiting me in Julian's old armoire?"

"Bea's in the kitchen now. You might ask her."

"Don't tell me she brought my wardrobe to this house in one trip——"

"It took several trips, Hoyt. And several carts, if you must know."

The lawyer tossed up his hands and settled deep in the love seat beside the mantel. Julian found that he was laughing aloud along with the others. He had ceased wondering long ago at the strangeness of that gathering in the formal Chisholm drawing room, under Harrison Chisholm's painted likeness.

Certainly old Timothy would whirl in his grave tonight if he could see the estate overseer puffing his pipe in a corner like a contented djinn and mingling in the talk as naturally as though this were a Glasgow pub. Timothy, thought Julian, would simply overlook the slender Negro in that facing armchair; the presence of Noah Heath would have been something too monstrous to admit. Only Louis Rothschild, with his Levantine good looks and his intense, almost febrile manner, would have struck no real dissonance in Timothy's breast. It was Louis who spoke now as the laughter died.

"We've been expecting you for some time, Hoyt. No one was less surprised than I when I faced you across the table tonight."

"So you've been waiting since spring for my bankruptcy?"

"Bankruptcy is no disgrace here today. It's how you take it that matters."

"All of you must see I'm taking mine gracefully."

Julian heard his own relaxed voice enter the talk. "Admit you're glad you came, Hoyt."

"Naturally I'll admit it. Among other reasons, because it means more argument with Jane." Again the lawyer snapped to his feet to offer his hostess a bow. "What shall we fight over tonight, Mrs. Chisholm?"

Jane turned away from the spinet as Hoyt spoke, and closed her album. Since she was the only woman present, she had not left the men when dinner had ended. Instead they had come to sit *en famille*

in the formal drawing room, where they had enjoyed the aroma of the best Chisholm armagnac and the sparkle of a Donizetti aria under Jane's expert fingers.

"Must we fight at all, Hoyt, now you're one of us?"

The lawyer wrinkled his handsome brow. "A pretty woman has certain rights, Mrs. Chisholm. But she should never offer her friendship too readily. It lessens her mystery. Am I making sense, Julian?"

"Emphatically."

"Regard me closely, Jane. We are temporary allies because of Julian."

"Because you're one of us."

"By no means. Julian may be one of you—though I'm not even sure of that. *I* will always be an unreconstructed nabob—let the Yankees do what they will."

"Answer one question frankly," said Jane. "Do you think of me as a Yankee?"

"No, Jane. You are a Southerner who should know better——"

"Better than what, Hoyt?"

The lawyer offered Noah Heath an apologetic smile. "Better than this current insanity. Land was created by God to earn profits for its owners. So were slaves. I'll stand by that conviction till I die. Noah will understand me, I'm sure. He was born a free man."

"I understand you perfectly," said the Negro doctor. There was no anger in the eyes that studied Hoyt Marshall. Secure in his own corner, Julian admired Noah's aplomb. There sits a true scientist, he thought; at this moment he's looking at Hoyt as a phenomenon, not a man.

"Noah is training two assistants in the clinic," said Louis Rothschild. "Both of them are sons of slaves; both are brighter than a dozen white mates I could name, from my own war service. Would you keep such minds in darkness, Hoyt, now that it's legal to expose them to the light?"

"It's a problem I'd handle with care, Louis. At this moment we've some four million slaves on our hands here in the South——"

"Four million freedmen, Hoyt."

"What do labels matter? They're still our Negroes—and our responsibility. I'll agree with Jane that we must put them to work with the least delay. I say that it's madness to pay them wages."

"How else can you induce them to work?" asked Julian.

"Feed the ones that return. Feed them well. Give them shares, if you must—after you've banked your own profits. And when I say *shares*, I don't mean cash. I mean better food, from a central commissary—calico for the wenches—rum at New Year's—a shoat to butcher——"

"How does that differ from slavery?"

"I'm not saying there's a difference. I'm only saying we must care for our own in our own way. We can no longer buy and sell Negroes—but we can use them as we see best. In a plantation economy the owners must make the rules."

"What if the Congress takes our land away?"

"Thad Stevens and his gang would like nothing better. But they won't dare to go so far; forty acres and a mule is only a slogan for the rabble-rousers. A Negro landowner is as unthinkable in Carolina as a Negro guest in that Yankee heaven, the Hanover House."

"We have Negro landowners now."

"Hard-scrabble farmers, killing themselves on a few upcountry acres. They're no more a threat to our system than the poor whites."

"My family were poor whites," said Jane quietly. "I'd say they were a considerable threat today."

"Only if they join hands with the blacks. Only if they make a political party that'll still be strong in five years' time. It's beyond their abilities, Jane. No one hates a Negro more than a red-neck—especially a red-neck on the make. It's a lesson the poor white has learned well—from the plantation owner."

So far the discussion had been conducted in quiet tones, with no more acrimony than a debate. Now Macalastair spoke sharply from his corner—so sharply, in fact, that all eyes turned in his direction.

"God forgive you, Mr. Marshall, but you're no better than the devil's advocate."

"This from you, Mac?"

"The times are against you, sir. Or should I say the cotton gin and the mechanical reaper? Agreed, this war was a fearful blunder. Those two inventions alone would have killed slavery in another generation. Take the word of a man who knows."

"The Negroes are still our property," said Hoyt. "We must still use them as best we can. How else can we protect them from them-

selves—these Africans only a generation removed from jungle tom-toms? I tell you that segregation is the only answer—work and more work. Reapers be damned. Men are still cheaper than machines."

"That's a monstrous lie," said Jane.

The lawyer's eyes twinkled. "It's my conviction, dear lady. Julian would endorse it if he were as honest——"

Julian cut in promptly: "Never in this world, Hoyt. And I know you don't mean any of this. You're only arguing for the fun of it."

"I was never more serious."

"Then why are you here?"

The lawyer took the question with aplomb. "Because I'm your friend. Because you may need me—badly—when your note comes due at Peabody's. Especially if you allow an abstract philanthropy to bankrupt you in advance."

"We've heard this before," said Jane. "That's why we're letting him finish—without interruptions."

"You've over a hundred Negroes on the land tonight," said Hoyt. "More will come now they know that Julian is in charge. Those Negroes can make or break you, depending on how they're handled."

"You'd use them as slaves again?"

"I'm telling you that slavery is the black man's lot in America—North or South. Two hundred years ago we accepted it as part of our economy. As cheerfully as the Yankee accepts a new type of slave today—the immigrant." Hoyt flashed a glance at Louis Rothschild. "Can you deny that a Massachusetts cotton spinner was worse off before the war than a well-housed, well-nourished field hand?"

The Jewish doctor shrugged ruefully. "At least the factory slave had the right to better himself."

"What good are rights when opportunity is only an illusion? Who really profits in the North—except a few hundred families who own the means of production? Who'll really profit in our West, but the railroads and the cattle barons? The same is true here. It was true before the war—and it'll be true once again, when this anarchy subsides. A few of the weaklings will blow out their brains—Julian saved me from that fate today. Some will go melancholy mad behind drawn blinds. The rest will find their strength—and their power. Deals will be made with the power men of the North. And we'll have masters and slaves again——"

"Not if the rest of us can make ourselves heard," said Julian. He smiled at Jane as he spoke, and felt his heart leap at the flash of warmth in her eyes.

"It's the way of the world, Julian," said the lawyer. "How can you alter human nature?"

"By setting an example at Chisholm Hundred. By paying good wages——"

"You know where those wages will go? To the liquor merchant and the hawker. To the red-white-and-blue salesman——"

"What do you mean by that?"

"You'll learn soon enough. We all know that the scalawags have no intention of giving the Negro a chance. That doesn't keep them from selling every ex-slave with cash a bundle of red, white, and blue sticks—with instructions to stake out his claim in some corner of an ex-master's land. Preferably in the dark of the moon. That claim's supposed to be valid when new laws are passed in Washington."

"Surely our Negroes don't believe such nonsense."

"Wait and see. I'm telling you that most of them are only marking time. We'll have bloodshed next—on a real scale—if the spellbinders don't keep their promises. That's another problem we must settle right here—on the land. You can rest assured that the troops will stay in Wilmington and mind their own affairs."

Julian turned to the Negro doctor. "You've been very silent, Noah. What do you think of this reactionary's views?"

The Negro's reply was even milder than he expected. "Mr. Marshall is right, in part. Human change is a slow thing, Dr. Chisholm."

"Surely we needn't go back to slavery again."

"By no means. I think you've set a fine example here. I hope that others will follow your lead. But the problem is still economic. Until the Southern Negro is really *needed*—until he can educate himself by white standards and learn to take his place in the industrial pattern, North and South——" Noah spread his fine surgeon's hands in a gesture of resignation, letting the picture complete itself. "The Negro must stop shuffling like a frightened child; he must learn to walk like a man if he's to set his feet on freedom road. It's a hard thing to learn, Doctor, when you've made yourself small for two centuries. Mr. Marshall has assured you that the Negro will get little help from his former master."

"What's your solution?"

"Time. Education—in the white camp, as well as the black. Patience, above all, and a prayer now and then."

"What would you pray for, Noah?"

"That men in America may someday live as brothers. That they'll share the opportunities fairly, without hate or fear. Is that too much to ask of the human race?"

"I'll let our cynic answer that."

The lawyer pounced on the silence. "Noah has answered for me. It's far too much to ask."

"And what's your solution?"

"Take back what's ours—including our dark helpers. Work 'em—and keep 'em in line. As Noah says, there's no place for them in the North; the immigrant will never share his factory bench with a black. They aren't wanted in the West—any more than the bona fide slave was wanted before the war. Until Utopia comes, they must stay on the land and accept their lot."

"And what if they don't?"

"We've ways of keeping them," said Hoyt. "Effective ways, Julian. You'll see, when things have settled."

"My esteemed uncle mentioned something of the kind," said Julian. "You might be more definite."

"I think I've said enough."

"Hoyt refers to the White Brotherhood," said Jane.

"Meaning?"

"Vigilantes," said Louis. "Organized among the planters to take the place of the old-time patrollers. Strictly sub rosa, of course, though nearly everyone belongs. I'm told that Clayton Randolph is grand master of the local cell—am I right, Hoyt?"

"I've said enough, Dr. Rothschild. If you'll all excuse me, I'll retire to the portico with my bottle and my memories."

"Stay where you are, Hoyt," said Julian. Already his memory had jumped back to his uncle's estate; to the strange silence that had hung over house and land, the still stranger feel of watching eyes. "Is this guerrilla warfare in the making?"

"You know better than to ask that. We policed our own land before the war. We'll police it again when the scalawags have had their day. In the meantime, we're preparing—that's all."

"So you're a member too?"

"A member who couldn't pay his fee," said Hoyt wryly. "Otherwise I might still be on my own land. You'll be asked in soon enough, unless——" The lawyer paused as his eyes caught Jane's level stare; for the first time he seemed genuinely embarrassed. "Naturally it's understood that you have protection of your own——"

"Hoyt means rather more than that," said Jane. "The Brotherhood will stand aloof for a while—until they see how well you've tamed your wife."

"You'll also be asked to send me North where I belong," said Noah Heath. "Assuming, of course, that I'm still alive. Bullets have missed me more than once on the Wilmington road."

"You don't mean it!"

"For the past week," said Jane quietly, "we've been sending Noah into town under guard."

Julian banged to his feet. "I'll see my uncle about this at once. Tonight, if someone will ride over with me!"

"Stay where you are, Doctor," said Noah easily. "You've had a long day—and I'm quite safe for the moment."

"Perhaps you *should* return to New York——"

"And miss the chance of a lifetime to convince Mr. Marshall that I'm human?"

"You earned that, Hoyt," said Julian, and, obeying a quick impulse, he crossed the room to shake the Negro doctor's hand.

"Does this mean I'm dismissed from service?" asked Hoyt, his eyebrows lifted in mock dismay.

"By no means. You might ask Noah's pardon, but I suppose that's beyond you."

"None of my remarks were directed at Noah." It was the lawyer's turn to spread his hands in a gesture of peace. "I was merely injecting a note of reason into this model community. Of course, if you insist on remaking the world and ignoring your bank balance——"

"Finish it, Hoyt. That's why you're here."

"I'll finish—and then I'll really take my bottle into the night. First off, keep Jane out of overalls—and out of the fields. *She* might stop a bullet herself someday."

"Think what you're saying, Hoyt!"

"I'm thinking carefully, Julian." The lawyer bowed to Jane with

tipsy gravity. "Forgive me again, Mrs. Chisholm. A man who's drunk himself blind for a hundred midnights must taper off gradually. Even if he's among friends. . . . What was I saying? Jane keeps to the house. You ride your cotton rows, Julian. You, Noah, keep out of sight in that clinic. When the Brotherhood calls, the master of Chisholm Hundred will be—the master. And I suggest he meet the Brotherhood halfway."

"*No, darling!*"

They turned in unison, startled by the vehemence of Jane's outburst; startled still more when she ran to Julian and clung to him desperately. "I won't let you do this thing, you know," she said in a taut whisper. "Hoyt, you've said too much for once. Take that brandy outside and drink yourself sober. We'll chain you to Mac's ledgers in the morning."

"Julian will have no choice, my dear," said Hoyt, and he seemed to be quite sober now. "Julian must move with the times and his class——"

"You can't fight violence with more violence."

"You can suppress violence by time-honored means. But let's forget the White Brotherhood for now. As I say, they'll watch you carefully for some time before they make a move."

"They'll do well to keep their distance!" cried Jane.

"Dear lady, forget I even *mentioned* the Brotherhood. We'll all agree the crop comes first. Unless it's good, we belong to Peabody—and the lady who writes his checks. Am I right so far?"

Julian pressed his wife's hand and drew her down to the sofa beside him. For the moment the gesture set them apart from the whole room—a married pair, facing a hostile world without fear. "You're my friend, Hoyt," he said slowly. "I believe that still. Even after what you've said tonight——"

"Only a friend would speak so frankly, Julian."

"I'm saying that we can make this crop and treat our Negroes as free men. I'm saying we must make that beginning now as an example to the county—and the state. If my neighbors think I'm mad, so much the worse. As Jane says, let them keep their distance—and learn a lesson in brotherhood."

"It's your land, Julian—and your mortgage." Hoyt picked up the tall wooden brandy bottle and cradled it tenderly in his arm. "I shall now

drink myself insensible in the cool night air. Will you send a slave—pardon me, a faithful retainer—to bring me indoors before the morning dew descends?"

No one spoke for a moment after the lawyer had swayed through the french window. Noah Heath rose slowly from his chair and crossed to another window, where he stood staring into the night—defiantly, as a man might look back at a well-ambushed enemy who refuses to fight in the open. Then, as Louis Rothschild rose in turn, the Negro doctor turned with a smile that Julian long remembered.

"He's your friend, Doctor. Believe me. And he'll earn his way," Noah said.

"I'll second that observation, Julian," said Louis.

"And you, Jane?"

"I'm glad you brought him here," said Jane. "Truly glad. Hoyt is a link between your—shall we say your past and the thing we're trying to build here?"

"At least you know which side I'm on."

"We all know now, Doctor," said Noah Heath. "May I wish you good night and good fortune?"

The Negro left the room with a final handclasp. Louis paused in turn and smiled down at Jane as he struck palms with Julian.

"With this girl beside you, Julian, you'll make your own luck."

"If you're going the rounds at the clinic, I'll come along."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. You and Jane have earned a little time alone."

The two doctors marched out in solemn file without another word. Macalastair was already on his feet, grinning around his pipe; the hand that fell on Julian's shoulder now was as heartening as an accolade.

"Believe me, sir, *I* can use him too."

"So we're unanimous on something, Mac."

Julian had spoken without raising his eyes; he knew that he was already alone with Jane—joined, at long last, as they had never been joined in the brief rhapsodies of wartime. The spell was too precious to be broken, even when he heard the whisper of her gown and knew that she had moved to the same wide-open window where Noah Heath had stood, to drink in the beauty of the night.

"It's been a long time since we've been alone together, Jane."

"Twenty hours, to be exact," she said, and he knew that his wife still waited, immobile in the tall window frame, patient, even now, while the smoke of battle cleared.

"We weren't alone before," he said. "As you remarked at the time, there were ghosts between us."

"Are they here tonight? Do you feel we're being watched even now?"

He turned to her at last. Knowing that he could go to her when he liked, he savored that knowledge for a final moment. "Tonight we can laugh at ghosts together."

"Including the White Brotherhood?"

"Amos will handle them," he said. "We'll police our own land—thanks to your foresight."

"Amos won't be here forever," she said.

He took a step toward her, amazed to see that she was trembling a little there in the warm river breeze.

"What is it, Jane?"

"I suppose you *do* belong with these vigilantes, darling. After all, you're one of them."

"Must we talk of that now?"

But her voice swept on, as though she had not heard: "I know I'm a stranger here—with no real right to criticize. I know it's only human for the planters to organize—to put down these marauders. I've no right to say this is an—evil thing until it's proved itself evil."

"What are you trying to tell me, Jane?"

"Nothing, my dear." She turned as she spoke, and her eyes were humid with weariness. She moved into his arms, and the weariness vanished as though it had never been. "We can't let this war come between us forever."

"The war is over, darling. How often must I tell you that?"

"Not the war we're fighting, Julian. That's only beginning."

"At least we're on the same side now."

"That's all I care about," she said, and lifted on tiptoe with her words, to press her mouth on his. It was her old longed-for kiss, tender and passionate in a breath, and careless of tomorrow. A kiss that swept away might-have-beens in the singing ardor of the moment.

His head cleared as he stood in the shattered doorway of his living room, with his wife lifted high in his arms. Even in that gesture he

could not feel grotesque, though there was something oddly child-like in the way he kicked the fire-warped door behind him and ran, rather than walked, toward the spiral of stairway beyond.

"We've waited a long time to come home, Jane. . . ."

He looked to right and left as his foot sought the first tread on the stair. It was absurd, of course—for they had never been more alone—but he could not quite escape the conviction that eyes were trained on that stair well. Hungry eyes that resented his present happiness. . . .

"Why did you say we were being *watched*, Jane?"

"We're part of tomorrow, darling. Isn't it natural that yesterday should resent us—deeply?"

He laughed aloud as he carried her to the upper landing. As always, she had stated the dilemma exactly.

"Can we hold yesterday at arm's length tonight?"

Jane let her head nestle in the curve of his shoulder. Jane's sigh at that moment was a synonym for contentment.

"We seem to be doing nicely."

"After all, I never carried you over the threshold of Chisholm Hundred. I'm doing my best to atone——"

He turned into the upper hallway and walked instinctively down the corridor that led to the master's bedroom. Jane spoke once more as they stood on the doorsill of the huge starlit bedroom, with the sweep of river spilling in at the windows and the master's bed like an island in the desert of floor boards.

"Remember one thing, Julian——"

"Hush, darling! Don't talk for a while. I'm back again—I'll never leave you."

"You've never left me. It's I who have run away, always——"

"You've come home too, Jane. This is your home as well as mine."

"That's right, darling. This is our home, forever and a day. Remember that, no matter how you curse me tomorrow. . . ."

"Kiss me like that again."

"Kiss me back, and I won't mind a few curses."

"I love you, Jane—I'll never stop loving you."

"Remember that tomorrow—it's worth remembering."

Her whole body clung to him now, as though she could not bear to surrender this shared victory even for a moment. He felt his senses

reel in that wild embrace—reel and steady, as their union (so long deferred in the crucible of war) was translated into a reality more lasting than any dream.

ix

Deep in his wife's arms and reluctant to leave that sanctuary even for a moment of drowsy wakefulness, he heard the tinkle of glass just beyond the master's bed, the thud of stone on wood. He stirred resentfully, deep in the dream he shared with her; raising on an elbow, he blinked at the moon-silvered square of parquet and the stone (an emissary from an uglier world) that lay there in its bed of shattered glass.

It wasn't real, of course. Both the stone and the vague white shape that enclosed it were figments of the nightmare he had just survived there in the drowsy heaven of his marriage bed. Like the ghosts from another day that had thronged around his father's bedposts (and had vanished with bowed heads), this intrusion would vanish when he looked again. But the intrusion was no less actual when he rose from the bed, tucking the quilts firmly about Jane's soft breathing; the rasp of foolscap against his palm was real as sin when he loosened the buckskin thong that bound the note to the crude oblong of rock and spread it under the night light.

At first his mind failed to grasp the meaning of the scrawl. Even at a second reading it was unthinkable that an enemy could have penetrated so deeply into his domain. Worse than unthinkable that he should dare to toss this threat on the master's threshold:

J. Chishholm—

Yu Yankee-Lover, when will yu come to yur sensz?

Throw out that Union Bitch yure livin with, and go back to yure own Peepl—or yu and she will both be Dam Sorry.

Don't wurry about that Nigra who calls himself a doc. We took Keer of that black bastard already. Just like we aim to take keer of Others.

The threat was unsigned. He stared at it stupidly in the pale circle of the night light, noting that the script was well formed, and guessing, even now, that the spelling was a clumsy blind. Then he heard a

whistle from the garden and flattened instantly against the wall as he realized that he stood in clear silhouette against his window.

"*Are you there, Julian!*"

It was Hoyt, calling from the portico. Julian glanced down and saw the lawyer, his shirt front ripped, standing on the lawn and swaying a little against the faint starlight. Pulling the portieres tight over the window, he turned back to the bed, relieved to see that Jane was still in a deep slumber. Without conscious thought he bent above her to kiss her throat where it joined the warm curve of her breast. Then he fumbled into his clothes, remembered to thrust a pistol into his pocket, and felt his way downstairs.

Hoyt was waiting in the lower hall. As he struck match to candle Julian saw that his friend had blood on one sleeve and was still breathing hoarsely. The lawyer's first words, however, reassured him somewhat.

"Don't worry, Julian—this is a scalawag's blood, not mine."

"Did you see him throw a rock?"

"I did indeed. That's when I hit him. In the face—only he didn't have one." Hoyt fought for breath. "They planned this well, Julian. But they didn't know I'd be fast asleep on the portico."

"Pull yourself together. What happened?"

"They slipped past Amos. One man or two—couldn't have been more. One smashed your window—and ran, when I hit him. Too bad I was still drunk as a goat—we'd have a prisoner now."

"Did you see his face?"

"He was under a hood, damn him."

"And the other?"

Hoyt put a hand on Julian's arm. "I'm afraid *he* got to Noah. Louis has done what he could—you'd better give a hand."

"Is the house guarded now?" Julian was already running toward the clinic, with Hoyt panting at his side.

"Amos says the house is *always* guarded. He still can't understand how they got through."

There was no more time for questions as they went through the door to the surgery; one glance at Noah's tumbled body confirmed Julian's worst fears. The Negro doctor was still alive, but his wound was a fearful one—a great matted contusion that spread from his left temple to his cheekbone. Already the swollen eyelid refused to open

under Louis Rothschild's gentle fingers. The breathing had a harsh, snoring sound that completed the ominous picture.

"Where did you find him, Louis?"

"On the clinic doorstep. He was working on a lung case, and I'd left him for a moment. Apparently he was lured outside and struck from behind."

"With a gun butt, it seems."

Julian's probing touch had told him the story. The skull itself, encasing the brain for its protection, could be the brain's greatest danger in cases such as these. The jagged ledge of bone, smashed downward by a brutally wielded gun butt, had driven deep against delicate tissue beneath. The slow, strong throb of Noah's pulse merely rounded out the picture; Julian had seen too many such wounds to misread that danger signal. Later, of course, when the pulse quickened and the great, sighing respirations grew shallow, Noah would be beyond human aid.

"I've trephines ready," said Louis. "And a Hey elevator."

"We must get him on the table at once."

Two Negro helpers came forward timidly as Louis called an order into the dark. Even as they sweated under the burden of Noah's body Julian saw the twitching begin along the right side, a spasmodic convulsion that seemed to center in the right arm. Only the rude pressure of bone on brain, caused by the depressed fracture, could have produced such spasms.

"We must shave his scalp first, Louis."

"Suppose I attend to that while you scrub."

Julian turned away from the table as the two Negro mates strapped the patient down, yielding his place to Louis, who came forward promptly with a razor open in his palm. Dipping his hands in chlorine water, checking the array of instruments on the side table, Julian knew that he could not have had a more expert assistant in the ordeal ahead. For an instant he debated the wisdom of returning to the house to make doubly sure that Jane was undisturbed. Then his mind closed automatically, shutting out the world beyond his surgery wall.

When he turned back to the operating table Noah's scalp gleamed where the hair had been shaved from the left temple. Louis had scrubbed the area thoroughly and stood ready with the chloroform bottle, though there was no present need for an anesthetic. It was

Louis who slapped the knife into his hand and bowed him to his place at the table. The small ceremony had helped before; a surgeon in his own right, the Jewish doctor knew how difficult it sometimes was to force the hand to its first slashing stroke.

"Can you feel the edge of the fracture?"

"Fairly well. It's swelling away fast, though."

The scalpel cut as he spoke—a temporal incision, chosen by instinct to lessen the inevitable bleeding. Thumb and forefinger stayed close to the blade, spreading the muscle sheath directly above the skull itself. The cut surface, he saw, was pale and swollen; water oozed under the blade, along with the blood, a sure indication of the tension beneath.

The knife bit onward, opening a wound three inches in length. The incision made, Julian stepped back, watching Louis pack the wound expertly with linen pledgets. Already his relaxation was as absolute as his deep-riveted attention to the business at hand. From this moment on he knew that he would proceed as coldly as an automaton, for it was only by concentrating upon the technique itself that he could give the operation every ounce of his skill.

He was back in the wound now, flicking out the pledgets one by one, careful to preserve the small clots that had closed many of the vessels. His forefinger traced the fracture line with ease as the Hey elevator came into his free hand. Noah's right arm and leg had begun to twitch violently, and he waited a moment more while the two Negro mates, their faces gray with fear, anchored the thrashing body to the table. When it was over he entered the wound again with the scalpel, opening the taut fibers of the fascia, separating the pouting pink edges with the knife handle, until the skull bone itself gleamed whitely in the depths of the wound. As he had feared, the break was half oval in shape, punched deeply on the brain beneath—so deeply, in fact, that upper and lower layers of bone all but overlapped.

Louis spoke hoarsely. "It looks impossible to elevate."

"We can try."

"You'll have to trephine at the edge of the fracture."

"There's no other way."

The burr-shaped steel had already come into his hand. He set the handle deep in his palm, anchoring the burr at the edge of the break. The cutting edge would bite deep, once he began the downward,

rotary motion that the technique of such a penetration demanded. Fortunately a small section of the outer bone was chipped away, affording the burr an easy anchor. Two deep-pressed revolutions filled the wound with bone chips; Julian waited while Louis cleared the area, then drove deeper, until he felt the instrument grate against the lower table of bone and knew that he had opened a space for the elevator.

When he drew the trephine from the wound he saw that a round hole had appeared in the uninjured side of the bone. The edge of the depressed fragment was now plainly visible. It had been driven under the sound bone around it; any attempt at elevation would encounter the pressed-under edge, perhaps injure the brain beyond repair. Still, he had no choice but to lift, and pray.

"The pulse is much faster, Julian."

He glanced across the table at Louis, reading the concern in the other doctor's eyes. The Hey elevator, curved and well tapered, entered the incision easily, grating slightly against the fracture, seeming to glide deep in the brain. Working carefully, Julian set his palm against the handle, testing it gently to make sure that the leverage was adequate. He heard Louis draw in his breath as the handle pressed downward. The driven-in fragment shivered slightly in the red welter of the wound, but there was no real shifting of the bone itself.

"We must trephine a second time. Hold this steady, Louis."

Again the burr whirred busily in the wound, biting a second point of entry, a good inch from the first. A second elevator entered the depressed bone table and anchored firmly. Louis stepped beside him without being asked, his lips tense: the Jewish doctor had learned his trade in the same hard school.

"Lift with me when I give the word, Louis."

He tested the leverage of both elevators, making sure that the pressure would be equal along the fracture. Then, as Louis paralleled his move, he set his palm hard on the handle of the first instrument.

"*Lift!*"

Again the depressed fragment seemed anchored there in some devil's vise. He saw the sweat pearl on Louis's forehead, knew that he, too, was straining every nerve. Then, with a gentle, crunching sound (as though a small animal were grinding its teeth deep in the

wound), the fragment lifted and shivered into place, until skull and fracture were level with each other.

Magically the twitching in Noah's limbs subsided; Noah himself gave a great sigh and relaxed in the hands of the two sweating mates. Julian, watching the bubble of blood expand in the wound and burst into an insistent red flood, did not join the patient's sudden relaxation. That blood could mean just one thing: a damaged artery, clamped by the depressed bone, had now burst wide somewhere below the fracture.

Louis, who had been sponging in a futile effort to control the bleeding, drew back from the table with a shrug that mingled frustration and despair.

"It's an artery, all right."

"Probably the middle meningeal."

"Then there's nothing we can do."

"We can go in and close it. There may still be time."

As he spoke Julian's mind was racing backward, sorting his memory of skull dissections in the hospitals of London and Edinburgh. The middle meningeal artery, entering the skull from the great blood trunks of the neck, pierced that bony carapace just beneath the brain. Pressure would never be effective against the soft brain tissue itself; and yet if they could open the area below, where the artery entered the bone canal, the bleeding could still be controlled. It was a desperate chance, where the slightest slip of the trephine meant paralysis and death. But it was a chance worth taking, with Noah dying before their eyes.

"We'll enter the foramen and press it off," Julian said, and the knife moved as he spoke, lengthening his original incision until the skull bone lay bare from temple to nape. Louis passed a fresh trephine across the table, spread-eagling his fingers on Noah's crown to steady the head still further. The trephine had already entered the bony table, driven with all Julian's strength, though his attack was rhythmic, even now, paced by a courage of despair. There was no time to measure exactly—memory alone must serve to locate the spot where blood vessel and skull were one.

A second opening was established above the first, and a third, outlining an area a trifle larger than a silver dollar; Julian could hardly risk a smaller opening, even if his anatomy was accurate. Louis passed

a heavy-jawed forceps as the trephine left the operative area; the pincers closed on the living bone, gnawing the triangle away, opening a rough window in the skull to expose a dark blood clot just beneath.

"The source of the bleeding," said Julian, and he could not still the leap of his heart at this bit of luck.

"Will you deliver the clot?"

"I must, if we're to locate the rupture."

The scalpel moved gingerly into the skull window, separating the layers of clot that seemed to fill the area between the inner surface of the skull and the tough dura mater that enclosed the brain itself. Julian saw at once that the injury was farther down, near the spot where the artery entered the brain box; the red flow welled faster as he inched the blunt scalpel handle toward the actual seat of the injury. A fraction deeper, the steel grated dully on bone, pressed hard, and found an anchor. Instantly the red flow ceased.

"We've found it, Louis. Will you clear the wound and be sure?"

Neither doctor spoke as the last blood-soaked pledget emerged from the triangular opening at the base of Noah's brain. Julian permitted himself a small sigh as the scalpel held firm and the dura mater shone dully in the skull window, unstained by even a fleck of red.

"It was a long chance, Julian. But it worked."

"Only because the rupture came where skull and artery join."

"That skull window was a stroke of genius."

"A stroke of luck, you mean. Noah would be dead now if I'd guessed wrong." They were working smoothly as they spoke, sponging the area clean as Julian released pressure for an instant to slip the first dressing against the artery wall. Using an aneurysm needle as a probe, and packing small strips of linen into the space between bone and blood vessel, he watched the bleeding diminish to an ooze and cease again. Like the improvised probe he had used, the dressing was impromptu, but effective; he knew that it would hold indefinitely until the artery wall could heal. Barring the threat of inflammation in the brain itself, Noah Heath might still recover from that murderous blow with his strength unimpaired.

Julian stepped back from the table, letting Louis complete the compress, watching with a smile as the other doctor permitted the muscle tissue to close over the bony opening. Reality had begun to stir beyond the surgery window: Julian heard a horse stamp in the stable

yard, heard Amos call a soft-voiced command. He held reality at arm's length a moment more while he rechecked the operative area one last time.

"We must leave a bony defect, Louis."

"Witch doctors used it a thousand years ago. Why can't we?" Louis began to cover the outer wound with pads of linen soaked in chloride of lime. "Our patient seems better already now we've let the devil out of his head."

Julian tested Noah's pulse. As he had hoped, it had steadied into a slow, even beat. Already his breathing had the calm regularity of a man deep in normal slumber.

"Now that it's over, Louis—do you know how it happened?"

"I'm afraid we'll never know. Let's pray it doesn't happen again."

"No one could post a better guard than Amos Martin. How do you suppose they got through?"

Louis shrugged. "Apparently it was a lone-wolf attack. Say two lone wolves, at most. As you know, Hoyt almost cornered one of them. To be honest, Julian, I'm surprised it didn't come sooner. You've no idea how industriously we're hated in this corner of Carolina."

"We, Louis?"

"Noah most of all, of course. With Jane a close second."

"Why Jane?"

"Too many hotheads on the Cape Fear know she was a Union agent. Too many of them have discovered she has brains. That's a great deal to forgive any woman."

"Surely it's understood that I——" But Julian did not complete the sentence: the note on his bedroom floor had answered it in advance.

"I stand by my wife, Louis," he said at last. "What we're doing here is right—and we'll prove it in time."

"Of course we will, Julian. And yet it's as well that Jane slept through the attack."

"Tell me the truth. Has she been threatened before?"

The Jewish doctor hesitated, then looked Julian straight in the eye. "Remember this: to your planter friends she seems an interloper."

"So it was they who sent these thugs tonight."

"I'm accusing no one. As I said, this isn't our first hit-and-run attack. More than one Bureau agent has been found dead in his bed; Harney himself was attacked in broad daylight on the streets of Wilmington."

"But Harney is a friend of the South——"

"So is your wife, Julian. But they both come here wrapped in the flag—and that's enough for the former masters of the Cape Fear Valley. They want their land back—and their power—and they want both on their own terms. The more you succeed here with Jane beside you, the more they'll hate you."

"What can I do, Louis?"

"You've answered that yourself. Go on fighting them, and pray for better times."

"Promise me one thing. If Noah lives, he goes North again."

Louis smiled grimly. "Is that an order from the plantation owner?"

"You can call it that."

"Noah will think he isn't wanted."

"He knows better. And he knows they'll try again if he recovers."

"That's true enough, God knows."

"I won't have his death on my conscience just because he was born in the wrong century."

"It's giving in, of course."

"Only to a point. We'll stand firm elsewhere. Besides, we can handle the clinic between us from now on. It's bound to shrink as things improve."

"I hope you're right. But I have my doubts."

"We can find other doctors, if need be. I'll force this county to accept Jane—or die trying. I won't risk Noah's life in that attempt. There are some things that stiff-necked fools like my uncle Clayton will never accept."

Louis Rothschild shrugged. "Have it your own way, Julian. I'll send Noah to New York when he recovers. He can keep up my old practice —in case I decide to return to it."

"Perhaps you should go too, Louis. I know you aren't happy here."

The other doctor shrugged again. "But I am happy while I'm working, Julian. So far this hospital has kept me too busy to think." Again he smiled at a picture of his own. "You see, crusading gets to be a habit. Like a good many misguided idealists, I went into the war to free the South from bondage. If you don't mind, I'll cling to that hope a little longer."

They shook hands solemnly in the surgery doorway; Julian let weariness claim him as he walked out into the morning. What Louis

had said made him vaguely ashamed; he could not tell why. Selfless devotion of this type was easy to understand—and hard to emulate.

There was something unyielding in both Louis and Noah, something rocklike that would outlast any storm. He wondered if he could have been as steadfast if Jane had been struck down in the place of the Negro.

X

Crossing his lawn in the pale early day, he looked up at the window of the master's bedroom, where the broken pane showed plainly against the tight-drawn portieres. At least it was good to know that his wife slept peacefully behind that satin barrier. The threat had come and gone; somehow it did not seem half as sinister in the growing light of morning.

Perhaps there would be no more attacks for a time. In all events, he could keep Jane close to the estate, instruct Amos to double his guard about the house itself. Remembering Hoyt's mention of the White Brotherhood, he wondered if he could join forces with such a group, after all. Jane's aversion was unexplained so far; in the circumstances, it was natural for her to be suspicious. They could discuss it in detail later. For the present he must remove the evidence of last night's threat before she wakened.

Hoyt sat in the downstairs hall, glancing through a newspaper in the misty light. With no surprise Julian saw that the lawyer had put aside his finery of the night and was already dressed for the fields. Despite last evening's diatribes, it was evident that his friend would take his duties seriously at Chisholm Hundred.

"You're up early, Hoyt."

"I never really retired. Glad to see that Noah was saved."

"How could you tell?"

"By your manner, of course."

"Tell me one thing, Hoyt—have you any notion who attacked us?"

"None whatever."

"Or who sent them?"

"If I knew I'd tell you. Word of honor."

Julian glanced at his watch: it was almost six. In a few moments

more the work bell would sound in the stable yard, bringing the hands from their makeshift billets for a hard hour's work before the breakfast halt. It would be easy to make himself a part of that communal movement from house to cotton row. Too easy, perhaps, when he recreated the night just gone.

Hoyt said, "You might have a look at today's *Journal*, my friend. It came up from Wilmington for you by special messenger."

Julian glanced at the ink-smudged sheet for the first time—and the note scrawled at the top of the first page:

DEAR DOCTOR:

I rather fancy that this will make you the Man of the Hour—in our Fair City and environs. It may also cost you your Skin, or choice portions thereof—yet I think you're the Sort of Fellow who won't mind risking a Good Deal, in a Good Cause.

SAUNDERS

"What's this mean, Hoyt?"

"The answer is under your nose."

But Julian's eyes had already caught the leader directly below that penciled scrawl. The story was headlined in heavy black type; his name leaped at him from the page even before he could begin the text.

SOUTHERN PLANTER SHOWS
WAY BACK FOR SOUTH

Dr. Julian Chisholm
Hero
of Vicksburg
and
Chickamauga
Launches Noble Effort

The story that followed, written in bombastic prose, was all that the headline promised. Julian skimmed it rapidly, feeling a hot resentment at the facts disclosed, and an irrational pride that his challenge was in the open.

Here in the Cape Fear Valley, at a time when ready-made Utopias are arriving from the Capital of a Reunited Nation in Gross Lots, an experiment in Large-scale Agriculture is in Progress that may Blaze a Trail in a troubled region still striving to bind up the Wounds of War.

On the famous Cape Fear Plantation, Chisholm Hundred, a Confederate Hero and Surgeon, Dr. Julian Chisholm, is proving that Negro and White can work together in Peace and for Mutual Profit. Begun by Mrs. Chisholm during the doctor's recent serious illness, the Experiment (if we may call it that) is already well on the way to success. Unlike so many of its Neighbors, Chisholm Hundred exhibits all the Old-time Activity these days—employing, as it does, almost a Hundred Hands, both white and black, and operating, as well, a Hospital where the wounded and ill of the Disbanded Host in Gray have been helped on those First Long Steps to Health.

The present Writer can only wish that every Reader of the Journal could have sat beside him recently, when Dr. Chisholm described his Work—and could have observed the Enthusiasm, the Honest Concern for his Fellow-Man, that inspired him. Those who saw him risk his Life at Vicksburg (as this writer did) to save a wounded Union soldier would know that he could not fail to exhibit the same Courage and Loyalty when the time came to restore his War-Torn Homeland.

Carolina and her Sister States will watch, with Profound Interest, the fortunes of Chisholm Hundred. Here, at last, one finds that Deeds are put before Promises. Here is one Planter brave enough to show the way to a Happier Time, where a Sick Land may grow well again, and a Tired People may rediscover their Strength and their Destiny.

"If you ask me," said Hoyt, "our crusader of the quill means to run you for office this fall—if and when we're allowed to hold an election."

"He had no right to print this without my consent."

"No right at all. Are you praying it gives your uncle Clayton a stroke?"

Julian laughed aloud. "At least it's a fair statement of our views here. I'd never have permitted that story to be published if Saunders had consulted me—but I can't say I'm sorry it's in print."

"Here's hoping you don't eat those words later, Julian." Hoyt's finger indicated another item in the *Journal*. "I suppose Saunders felt he should run your eulogy today—if only to balance good news with bad."

The paragraph the lawyer indicated was printed in a box at the bottom of the page under the heading, "Military Intelligence":

The editor of the journal has been informed that General Charles Harney, Commanding Officer in the Wilmington Military District for the past four months, departed Last Night for Charleston on the U.S. Sloop

Parkinson, under orders from Secretary Stanton of the President's Cabinet. It is not expected that the General (whose administration of this area has been very Fair and Just) will return. Colonel Elias T. Hudnall, former Adjutant of the District, has been appointed Acting Commanding Officer of the district, pending the assignment of another Officer to the Command.

"You don't know Hudnall," said Hoyt. "And it's just as well you don't. Some say he works for Peabody, Sprague and Company on a full-time basis, but that's a slight exaggeration. I do know he's paid in land for his favors."

"Harney was Jane's best friend in Wilmington. This will be a blow to her."

"If you ask me," said the lawyer, "I think she knows already."

"Why do you say that?"

"Go upstairs for your answer," said the lawyer. His voice stopped Julian on the landing. "Don't be long. We've a day's work ahead. Fences to be mended all down the line——"

Fences to be mended . . . The words echoed in the back of Julian's brain as he hurried down the hall; he paused for a moment to weigh their import before he opened the door to the master's bedroom. With Jane's chief protector removed from Wilmington and a uniformed servant of Lucy's lording it in his stead, he would need friends of his own more than ever. Friends would be waiting, of course, much nearer home than Wilmington; the fence mending that Hoyt had suggested could have a happy outcome, after all, if he played his part well, stood firm on his rights.

He turned the knob of the bedroom door and walked in with soothing words on his lips. After all, Jane had carried the whole burden too long. It was well, in a way, that he had an unanswerable argument for ordering her to stay close to home, until he could resume contact with his friends—and his class.

He paused on the threshold, letting the words die unspoken, oppressed by the echo of emptiness that met him like a visible blow. He knew that she was gone long before he could toss the portieres wide and let in the morning, and he felt his anger stirring as he puzzled out her departure. Probably she was in the stable yard at this moment, giving Amos his day's orders—or, worse still, preparing to sally forth with the hands for another day in the fields.

"We'll have no more of *that*," he said sternly, unaware that he had voiced his resentment aloud. It was a wife's duty to await her husband's return, after the night they had spent together. . . . He stared a moment at the massive bed where she had given so freely of her love —the marriage bed (and we are married at last, he told himself with a pleasantly nervous tingle) where she had moaned in his arms in a delight that seemed to have no ending.

Perhaps he should have wakened her, after all, when the prowler had broken his slumber. He put the thought aside as he crossed to the dresser and saw the crumpled paper on the floor. It was not necessary to open that crushed white ball of foolscap to recognize the threat he had received this side of midnight. He knew instantly with a sinking heart that Jane had found that note and read it sometime after his silent departure from the room.

There was another note, enclosed in a sealed envelope, on the dresser top, weighed down by his comb, where he could not fail to see. Knowing what he would read before he broke the seal, he stumbled to the window to make sure that he read aright. The morning sun, striking a long arrow down the Chisholm rooftree, seemed to point the path his wife had taken, even before he could force his mind to grapple with her first words:

My darling:

After what's happened to Noah, I have no Choice but to leave you for a while. We all know that the next Blow would fall on me—and on you, as well, if I stay on.

This isn't Good-by, Julian—after what has passed between us, it could never be Good-by.

I must believe that, he thought dully, or I'm lost indeed. She loves me: she'll always love me. Enough to leave me, for my own good and the good of Chisholm Hundred. Enough to risk losing me to Lucy and the past.

It's only fair to tell you that I've Unfinished Work to do for the Union. And when I say *Union*, I mean both North and South, your State and mine. We must learn to live Together, or we are Lost indeed.

The pen had stumbled on those last words, as though Jane herself had realized their futility. Work for the Union, he thought, was a phrase that could mean anything. In wartime it had meant that she

must work among her own people as a Yankee agent. In this still more perilous time of peace, could its meaning be similar? He turned back to the note, knowing from his own bitter past that Jane could never tell her secret now.

This Work I speak of was just beginning when we found each other again in Richmond. It was delayed by your Illness—and delayed still more by our Struggle to put the Estate on its feet again.

My Dearest, I know that Chisholm Hundred is in Good Hands now. I know that you will make our land prosper, that you will care for our people as they deserve. (May I say our land and our people, now that I am all yours?)

If every Southern Landowner were as wise and as just as yourself, my Work for the Union would be ended long ago. I am sure that you will do all you can to bring Others to our View.

Louis knew she would be leaving, he thought. So, for that matter, did Hoyt: he must have seen her go. But even in this numb moment he could not curse his friends as they deserved; he knew Jane too well for curses. Once his wife had decided on a course of action, mere man could hardly dissuade her.

Amos and some of his Riders will go with me, so I'll be well guarded. So will Chisholm Hundred, since Lafe and the Others will stay behind.

The next few Years should tell the Story, Julian: whether the South will remain a Vassal to the North, or find itself in Peace as it never could in War. The Road to all such discoveries is long and hard—and for a while we must walk it alone.

You have your Work here: I must find mine. Pray God that we both do our Work so well that we may soon be together again.

Your Wife

Jane

The last words were underlined. He clung to that small comfort for a moment while the whole letter burned itself into his memory. Part of his mind still burst with wild scheming. If he saddled a horse and rode on her trail he might still overtake her; if Lafe knew her whereabouts he would talk at a pistol point. . . . The saner half of that same brain assured him that pursuit was useless. Jane and her lieutenant, Amos Martin, were past masters at the art of vanishing as casually as blown leaves.

When he went downstairs at last, the letter was still tight in his fist. In his library he opened the Bible and pressed it among the family records, locking it tight above the page where he had inscribed his wife's name. When he had pocketed the key, he knew that her revelation was safe from prying eyes, including his own. Come what may, he told himself solemnly, I won't touch that lock again until she's safely back at Chisholm Hundred.

The work bell tolled, and he walked firmly out to answer its summons. As Hoyt had said, there were long days ahead for every Southerner. Days when a man could only plow his fields and pray.

III

The Crisis

1

THE PHAETON could belong to no one but Lucy Sprague. He would have known it anywhere by its yellow wheels, its gleaming ebony dashboard—to say nothing of the two black geldings that stood between the poles, their yellow cockades proud in the crisp December air. Apparently the carriage had just deposited its owner at Chisholm Hundred. The grooms were still bustling in the stable yard amid the buggies and buckboards that had brought the others to this conference.

Fresh from his own fields, Julian reined in sharply in the shelter of his blacksmith's shed. For some time now he had expected Lucy to appear here without warning—to flaunt their friendship (but that was a pallid word for their recent relations) by riding out from Wilmington in her showiest rig.

It was, of course, a melancholy fact that Lucy Sprague had more right than most to attend this landowners' gathering. If the purpose was vague, on the surface—for reasons of prudence—each planter knew the real reason for his presence here today. When the meeting closed it would be firmly decided that one Dr. Chisholm would run for the state Senate chair to be contested by special election in the spring. The same Dr. Chisholm would yield at last to the pleas of friends and submit to initiation in the Klan. Now that the White Brotherhood had been absorbed in this larger body, the Ku-Klux Klan was the only group capable of creating order in a region where order had all but ceased, save at individual pistol point. Dr. Chisholm's name had been too long absent from its roster, especially if Dr. Chisholm intended to run for office against the scalawags.

Everyone in Wilmington knew that Lucy Sprague's money had

made the Klan possible; this, too, was an added reason for her presence here today. Did it matter now if the ghost of Julian Chisholm's wife (that strange interloper whom most people considered dead) still stood in the doorway, denying her admittance?

The master of Chisholm Hundred sat quietly in his saddle, hating the moment when he must join the others—and hating, even more, the need to justify Lucy's presence to that reproachful ghost. If Jane were really a ghost, he thought, I'd be easier in my mind tonight. If my heart knew she was dead, I could really yield to Lucy Sprague, admitting that I'm doomed and damned, and not much caring.

ii

Two years and more had passed since he had entered his bedroom and found only a note to explain his wife's absence. They had been crowded years, and he had yielded to their compulsions, as a man must.

Selling his cotton to the highest bidders, greasing all necessary palms along the way, using Hoyt Marshall and Hoyt's abundant friendships, he had made his peace with Peabody's Bank and had kept a balance besides. True, most of his ready cash had merely siphoned into the land—to strengthen fallow fields, to build snug cabins for his workers along the river bluff, to raise rainproof shelters for the new gins and seed mill he had bought in Pittsburgh. Jane—and he could still say this with a glow of inner pride—would have done the same. Jane, if she could stand beside him now, would approve his stewardship during her long absence.

The rest, he reflected, gentling his mount in the depths of the blacksmith's shed, had gone by rote. Too busy, for the most part, to mingle with his kind, he had merely tumbled into bed at the end of each long work day, assured, at least, that Chisholm Hundred was safe pro tem.

There had been interludes, of course, when the best minds in the South had fought for survival and had emerged with the only compromise they could invent. With General Stedman (of Stedman's Knoll) and Julian's egregious uncle Clayton, he had attended the meeting at Raleigh, called by the governor to discuss the President's

plan for returning the Southern states to the Union. Voting solemnly with his fellow planters, he had repealed the act of secession (in the name of a no-longer-sovereign Carolina) and had endorsed the freedom of his Negroes—an empty gesture to Washington, where the same acts had been proclaimed at the White House.

The State Constitution had been rewritten in accord with the new doctrine of freedom (if not precise equality) for all men, regardless of color. For the moment, at least, he had found it inspiring to sign his name along with the solemn line of veterans—many of them secessionists—all of whom were working wholeheartedly to turn swords into plowshares, to start anew.

He could afford to smile now as he remembered the high hopes of that convention at the state capitol. Later a new governor had insisted that he journey to Washington as proxy for a freshly elected representative, too ill to attend the opening of the new Congress—the first to which the elected delegates of the conquered states had dared to seek admission. Even when he had boarded his train at Raleigh (with his badge of office heavy in his wallet and Uncle Clayton breathing tag ends of rhetoric at his side) he had known, in his heart, that this would be a futile journey; that the ruling clique in Congress, arrogant as never before in the history of the Republic, would refuse to seat the delegations.

Washington had been bitterly cold that winter. Lingering in his open shed and shivering in a sudden gust from the river, he remembered that other December afternoon on Pennsylvania Avenue, when he had left his rooms at the Willard Hotel to join his uncle and the other gentlemen from Carolina. They had walked solemnly down the wind-whipped sidewalks, with eyes straight ahead, ignoring the ribald whispers around them, the crowds that seemed to swirl out of each alley with that biting breeze, until their way was all but blocked.

At the steps of the Capitol itself bayonets had cleared a path for the returning Rebels; he had walked up those steps with his head high, watching a sudden snow flurry dust the pillars of the almost finished dome. It had been Lincoln's insistence, he remembered, that had pushed through the completion of the Capitol in the war years—a symbol of a Union now established at the bayonet point. . . .

A small block of gallery seats had been reserved for the Southern representatives. He had marched in with the others, feeling the pres-

sure of eyes all around him. The spectators that jammed the visitors' benches that day could not get enough of staring, it seemed, and nearly every eye was hostile. No attempt had been made to preserve order as tongues wagged at the effrontery of these Rebels who dared to present themselves here as the deputies of a conquered people. He had braced his shoulders again, fighting down the absurd conviction that he would not leave that smoky hall alive.

Washington had buzzed that day with the news of Thaddeus Stevens's latest move. Like every delegate on those crowded benches, Julian knew that the Republican caucus, which Stevens dominated, had already declined to discuss the admission of the Southern congressmen on the floor in open debate. Instead a committee would be chosen to consider their eligibility—a committee of radicals, whose decision was known in advance. . . . Julian's eyes had turned to the floor of the House as the benches slowly filled: he saw the smoke rings form above friendly conclaves in that vast brown cave, heard a brass cuspidor ring with a well-placed quid. From where he sat, the American Congress resembled an untidy club, friendly enough to its members, contemptuous of outsiders.

"Here comes Thad!"

"Damn his nigger-loving heart!"

The representative from Pennsylvania was limping to his seat—a wiry, gray-faced man with the mark of death already on his head. A man whose hair resembled a bird's nest, his eyes hooded and almost reptilian, his mouth twisted in a perpetual sneer.

"They say he made millions in pig iron."

"He'll make more if he can keep our furnaces cold."

The Speaker's gavel demanded order as Stevens took his seat. Fascinated despite himself, Julian leaned forward to watch the rich Pennsylvanian dominate the crowded benches with no more than the flick of an eyelash, the clenching of a pallid fist that seemed to beat in time with the gavel. Here, then, was the force that might have impeached Lincoln—the nemesis that had sworn to impeach Johnson if the President refused to collaborate in his plan to destroy the South.

Julian's eyes sought out the only opposition that still mattered in that radical-ridden chamber. There, a few seats behind Stevens, sat the leader of the minority party—James Brooks, Democrat of New York. Across the way was Henry Raymond, the New York newspaper

owner who still championed Johnson's tolerant plan for reconstruction. Grave-faced and determined, these two representatives watched Stevens coldly, as though they were already resigned to the inevitable.

"Watch out for Tennessee, Doctor," said a voice behind him. "Maynard is a radical—and a loyal member of the House since the war. If they seat him today, we may have our chance later."

"And if they don't?"

"I'm taking the night train for Raleigh. I'd advise you to do likewise."

Below them the clerk had already begun the roll call. Familiar names were answered from all parts of the floor—an impressive list that included no one from the South. As the clerk reached Tennessee the tension along the gallery rail all but crackled. Julian's companion spoke in a whisper:

"That clerk is from Gettysburg. Where old Thad first practiced law. You'll see how much chance we have——"

A hoarse babble sounded in the galleries as the clerk passed over the name of Tennessee, and then a shout from the floor while the gavel demanded order.

"I ask the authority for ignoring the state of Tennessee."

"*That's Maynard, Doctor!*"

The clerk lifted his eyes to the gallery, as though the whisper had carried in the sudden hush. "I can give my reason, if necessary."

Stevens spoke for the first time—a cool, drawling voice weighed with contempt. "It will not be necessary."

But Brooks was already on his feet. "I can give it now, sir. The resolution of a party caucus. Is this country to be governed by one party?"

"I hope so," drawled Stevens, and the gallery roared anew.

"Will the gentleman from Pennsylvania tell us when he plans to press this resolution of his caucus?"

"At the proper time."

Brooks had settled in his seat, red-faced with anger, before the gavel fell. Searching for Maynard in the murky rear of the floor, Julian realized that he had already stalked out, with his protest registered. The whisper sounded again behind him:

"If we move fast, Doctor, we can still catch that train. Care to join me?"

Even then he had refused to bow to the inevitable. Seated at that

same gallery rail, he had watched day after day as Congress rumbled into gleeful action under the radical whip. He had heard the deep, baying disapproval that greeted the President's message, and the roar of applause that had filled each pause in Stevens's own speech, the famous list of doom for eleven states that had once had the temerity to secede from the now invincible Union. Reduced to conquered satraps, Stevens promised, those states would be remade, and depend in the meantime on the will of Congress. Military government would continue, of course. Federal legislation would protect the Negroes from their former masters. The land that the planter of yesterday could no longer manage would be confiscated for the freedman of tomorrow. Worst of all, those who had participated in the recent rebellion, in a position of command, would forfeit the vote. . . .

He had stumbled from the Capitol that day, fighting to keep down the curses that rumbled in his throat. His friends had been right to go home by the first train; who could blame them if they banded together to hold what was theirs against such usurpers?

On the steps he had paused to breathe deep of the wintry air, feeling his head clear a little despite his rage. He was not too surprised when a well-dressed, pleasant man, whose face was vaguely familiar, rattled down the steps beside him and grasped his hand.

"I was wondering when you'd have enough, Doctor."

"Have we had the pleasure, sir?"

"Not so far. I saw you leave your place at the gallery rail and took the liberty of following. The fare that my colleagues are wolfing at this moment is too rancid for my taste."

Then he recognized this stranger who was not quite strange: this pleasant, dapper man was Henry Raymond, congressman from New York and publisher of the liberal New York *Times*.

"Don't be surprised that I know you, Doctor. My newspaper has published several leaders on your work at Chisholm Hundred."

"Does such news interest your readers, Mr. Raymond?"

"So you recognize me after all. I am flattered. Yes, the contribution you're making to recovery interests my readers profoundly. It's unfortunate there aren't more of you—my counterpart from Pennsylvania would be forced to eat his words much sooner."

"I'm afraid the damage is done now."

"So am I. Old Thad will die a happy man. Did you know he's al-

ready asked to be buried in a Negro cemetery?" Raymond smiled ruefully. "But I didn't stop you to damn our common enemy. The fact is, I've a message for you. Mrs. Chisholm asked me to deliver it today, without fail."

"You—know my wife?"

"That is my privilege, sir. But of course you wouldn't have heard she's in Washington."

"Perhaps you also know why she's—left me?" He was too astonished to resent the other's tone. Too eager for Jane again to mind the note of superior knowledge. If necessary, of course, he could choke her whereabouts from Raymond here and now. The headlines in the New York *Times*, he reflected, would be breath-taking tomorrow. . . .

"I know a great deal you aren't permitted to know, Doctor," said Raymond. "So, for that matter, do many high-placed gentlemen here. Gentlemen, I need hardly add, who must remain nameless——"

"When will she come back?"

"No one can answer that question at present. Will you believe that the work she's doing is vital to—our country's future?"

"I'll believe you—if you'll take me to her now."

The publisher bowed from the waist. "Didn't I say I had a message? She'll meet you tonight on two conditions: first, that you mention the meeting to no one. Second, that you permit her to go quietly —when she feels it's time to go."

Julian cursed through clenched teeth. It was not like Jane to approach him thus. "I've no choice but to agree, it seems."

"No choice at all," said Raymond blandly. "Shall we say your suite at the Willard, at seven? It might be a pleasant idea to offer Mrs. Chisholm dinner there. I can recommend the hotel's duckling. And the '63 Johannisberger."

It was Julian's turn to bow, a bit frostily. "You're honoring us too, sir?"

"Certainly not. Much as I'd like to report the meeting. This is strictly a reunion for two."

Julian stood immobile while the gentleman from New York descended the Capitol steps and paused at the bottom to lift his tall silk hat before he disappeared into his four-wheeler. Then he lifted a rebel war whoop that set the Washington pigeons circling madly, and rushed toward a carriage of his own.

iii

Until the day he died he would remember that supper at the Willard, down to the last sip of dry iced wine, the last broken syllable. . . . Now, seated astride a work-weary horse an aeon away, he could still feel his heart thud at the memory.

As is the way with reunions, it had raised more doubts than it had answered. It had left him unsatisfied, raging with hunger for more of her love, more determined than ever to master her when they met again. . . . *If* we meet again, he added sadly, dismounting in the shadow of the blacksmith's shed and leading the horse toward the stable yard—only to pause one more time to savor the bittersweet of that night.

He had expected an outburst of passion on both sides, there in his well-shuttered hotel sitting room—the passion of balked rage, with desire panting in the wake. He had felt sure he would be shouting long before the room waiter could uncork the wine and retire. Actually, the meeting had gone smoothly from the first: holding himself desperately in check, he had found he could kiss her hand in the open doorway and whisk her inside with a gallant flourish. . . .

"Our first meeting had the air of an assignation, Jane. This one, it seems, is quite in key."

"Our first meeting turned out to be very serious."

"Must we be serious tonight? Can't we just be happy?"

He saw that he had both pleased and surprised her with this welcome, and he pressed the mood hastily, lest the tumult of his real feelings spill over.

"May I say you were never lovelier?"

The compliment was from the heart. Above the wine-dark velvet she had chosen for their reunion, her throat was cream-white again; the hand that still rested lightly in his own had lost its work-callused roughness long ago. Whatever her work may be, he thought, it's kept her out of the sun. . . . Then he remembered that Jane had been quite as fashionably pale during the war, when she had risked her life to ride with the Underground.

But there was no Underground in the South today. Only the masked vigilantes who now patrolled nightly from each of the great estates, striving to force some pattern of order on their land. He kept his bewilderment in check and spoke quietly.

"You see, I can still admire your beauty—even when I'm in the dark."

"You must stay in the dark a while longer, darling."

The sudden endearment lashed his nerve ends like a whip. But he kept the room between them as she slipped out of her cloak. "So your publisher friend advised me. I'm still puzzled to know why you're here."

"I'm your wife, Julian. Can't I visit with you awhile?"

He felt the challenge in her eyes and knew that he had reddened to the roots of his hair. "You are my wife," he repeated slowly. "It's good of you to remember."

"It's something I'll never forget, Julian. I can hardly expect you to —return the compliment."

"Since you ask," he said, "I have returned it, so far. Don't tempt me beyond endurance."

The room waiter's knock broke the tension of that moment. For the next hour, while waiter and wine steward hovered above their table, the conversation was safe enough. A chapter-and-verse report on the progress made at Chisholm Hundred. Looking back on that hour later, he could hardly believe that he had been so self-contained. . . .

"You won't believe this, Jane, but we're out of debt now. Of course we'll go in again when we finish that new block of cabins."

"I'm glad you're using a dressed-stone foundation instead of stilts. It'll cut down the fever in spring."

"Did I mention dressed stone?"

"Amos gets reports from Lafe, you know."

"I guessed as much. So even Lafe hears more than I——"

"Lafe and Macalastair both," she said calmly. "I know you far too well, my dear. You'd spoil my work overnight if you knew where to find me."

But such breaks had been few while the dinner lasted. With the coffee and brandy he had even gone through the motions of settling in the corner of the overstuffed couch by the fire, while she hovered lightly above him to touch a match to his cigar. He had already decided to yield the stage to her—for the time being. This is my room, he told himself firmly, and you'll leave it on my terms. True, I promised to let you go when you asked, but promises of that sort are made to be broken.

"Why did you come, Jane?"

She settled on the ottoman before she answered, hugging her knees while she studied him for a long, oddly tranquil moment. "I've answered that: to see how you've fared."

"But you had your reports from Lafe."

"Lafe isn't the master of Chisholm Hundred. I had to see that master with my own eyes."

"Do you find the prospect pleasing?"

"Extremely. I'll grant you, he's a bit older than I remember. But he looks wiser too."

"Not too wise, Jane. At any moment now he'll break down completely—and admit he's missed you every moment——"

"I've missed you too, my dear. You must know that."

He studied the blue smoke ring his lips had just formed. When he could trust himself to speak, his voice was steady enough. "I know nothing of the—the interests that separate us. If I'm to believe your Mr. Raymond, the game will be worth the candle. Since you'll tell me nothing, I'm assuming that you—enjoy this game. So much that you've had little enough time to miss me."

"So you think I left you willingly?"

"You give me little choice, Jane."

"If you read my note you'll know why I left you alone."

"Admit you had a more important reason—the work that now engages you."

"Believe me, Julian, it *is* important——"

"You can give me no hint of its nature?"

"Not at this time."

"Or when it will end?"

"That depends on the South—on men like you. Planters who have turned their backs on might-have-beens——"

"How do you know I've gone that far?"

"But that's part of the reason I left you," she cried. "Don't you understand even now? You must find yourself, Julian. On your own. With no more argument from me. You must decide if you belong with the new South or the old——"

"What about Lucy?" he broke in. "Remember, I'm still in debt to Peabody. Or will be before I can put in my next crop."

Jane's eyes did not waver. "I was jealous of that woman once. I sup-

pose I still am. But it's a fight I can't enter on her terms. Someday I'll have a chance to tear her hair out. But it won't be on your account, my dear."

He pondered that statement a moment. How could Jane's work concern Lucy Sprague? He ventured a question, knowing in advance that it would probably go unanswered.

"Are you, by any chance, investigating our carpetbag governments for someone in Washington?"

"Those scalawags will hang themselves soon enough, Julian."

"Old Thad doesn't think so. He means to keep them in power forever."

"Stevens is a dying man," she said. "Much of the evil he's stirred up will die with him."

"I wish I could believe that. And you haven't answered my question. Are you trying to prove that Lucy Sprague is part of that evil?"

"I hardly think it needs proof."

"Too many American fortunes were made by bad means, Jane. I'll grant you that Victor Sprague was an evil genius while he lived. Lucy, of course, has followed in his footsteps——"

"And grown far richer, at the expense of a conquered state."

"Perhaps that's a necessary evil we must all endure. Certainly there's no hard money to be had in Wilmington today unless you go to Peabody. As I told you, my esteemed uncle was bought out by that same bank and now works as Peabody's agent." Julian considered his next remark carefully. "Peabody has foreclosed on others; he's always treated us fairly."

"Do you call ten per cent a fair interest on a crop loan?"

"It's the going rate today. We can afford to pay it."

"I still say that woman will destroy you if you give her time. But that's another thing you must discover on your own."

He smoked in silence, letting silence be his answer. His mask of tranquillity was wearing thin; he could barely hold back the accusation that now rose to his lips. There's something no woman can understand, he raged. You've left me with a first-class fight on my hands and a job of work to do. Do you honestly think that will pin me down until you return? Granted, a man's work is something he can't always share. But when he's lived with a woman, a lovely woman such as you, he's brought something into his life that only she can

satisfy. If she insists on leaving him to fill that emptiness alone, he'll find a substitute. . . .

"What are you thinking, darling?"

"I'm still wondering why you're here, Jane. You've told me nothing about yourself that matters. It isn't like you to torture me."

Watching the well-remembered kindness spring to her eyes (along with the first tears she had shed tonight), he clung stubbornly to his advantage. Are you here because you want me? he wondered. Will you admit, for tonight, that this room is our home? Or have you only come into my life to assure yourself that I'll stand firm at Chisholm Hundred?

"Julian, you know I've wanted to be with you every moment——"

"You've a strange way of showing it."

"Can't you see that other things may be more important than your happiness—or mine?"

"More important than our marriage?"

"We'll always be married. No matter how deeply you misunderstand my—my motives in leaving you for a while. No matter how far you go astray——"

He was on his feet now, letting emotion rip free with his first shout. "Suppose I told you I've been sleeping with Lucy?"

"But you haven't——"

"You're right, I haven't—so far. How long do you suppose I'll keep away from Lucy—or someone like Lucy—if you won't come back to me?"

Jane spread her hands wearily. "Of course you can't see that's just what she's waiting for!"

"Why shouldn't she take me as her lover?" he cried, hoping that the brutality of the question would stagger her.

"Women like Lucy don't take lovers," said Jane. "I could forgive you a love affair while I'm away. She takes men for just one reason—to possess them, and all they own."

"So you are still jealous. I'm thankful for that, at least."

"Surely you knew she was Hoyt Marshall's mistress before she bought him out?"

"How did you discover that?"

"Never mind, Julian. It's a fact nonetheless. And it's a fact she wants more from you than Chisholm Hundred. She wants your name too;

she wants to queen it in that house as she once did with your brother. She wants the one thing her money can never buy—respectability. Are you prepared to give her that?"

Remembering his meeting with Lucy in Wilmington (and her calm avowal of that same objective, in almost the same words), he drew back from their battle for a moment. This, after all, was a real warning, and Jane had offered it fairly.

"Believe me, Jane—if I took any woman, I'd take her for just one reason. To put you out of my heart for a while."

"Then keep clear of Lucy Sprague. It's she who'll do the taking."

"I'll remember that warning if you'll remember mine."

"Thank you, Julian," she said, and rose with the words, gathering her cloak about her bare shoulders.

"So you're leaving?"

"You promised I could go when I liked."

"Are you sure we've—said all we have to say?"

"I've learned what I came to learn, my dear. Believe me, it was sheer luck that made this visit possible."

"For the last time, Jane, what keeps us apart?"

"You'll know in time."

"Will I see you again?"

"When my work is over."

"Promise this much. If you're in any danger, send me word through Amos or Lafe——"

"I can't even promise that." She drew the tassel of her cloak into a precise knot and offered him her hand. "Won't you even wish me luck?"

"Tell me where you're going."

"To the end of this corridor," she said calmly. "I've always a room at the Willard when I'm in Washington."

"Are you meeting someone there?"

"Amos is riding up from Richmond," she said. "He'll call for me—in the early morning."

"Then you needn't go now!" he cried. So far he had not dared to touch the proffered hand. "Not for hours, Jane."

"Not for hours," she said calmly.

"Why couldn't you tell me sooner?"

"I didn't want to wear my welcome out."

"Haven't you heard a word I said?"

"Words don't matter now, Julian. Not if you still want me——"

"Damn you, I'll always want you!"

"More than pride? More than Lucy?"

But he answered the question silently, feeling her tears hot on his cheek as their lips met at last, feeling her body melt into his as the cloak slipped to the floor unheeded. . . .

Hours later, when his last resentment had vanished in the flame of a shared rapture, they lay in their warm cave of blankets, whispering drowsily between their kisses. Now it was as though she had never been away, not even for a moment; hearing the happy beat of her heart, he could pretend that they would never lose one another again. Not even to Amos, who would never ride through the sleet storm that was building outside. He rose on an elbow, comforted by the hiss of snow on the windowpane.

"You needn't go tomorrow, darling."

"But I must, Julian."

"In this storm?"

"The snow will be over by dawn. But I'd go with Amos, even so."

"Pretend he isn't coming. Pretend we can be together always."

"We can someday."

"We could leave Washington now. Put this whole brawling country behind us."

"Where else could we go?"

"London, if we liked. Or South America. I've friends down there, from Cuba to Brazil."

"*Emigrés*, Julian. The world's saddest people."

"We could settle in Rio or Buenos Aires. I could set up in practice——"

"And sell Chisholm Hundred?"

"Even run-down estates are bringing bonanza prices. A going plantation like ours would bring a fortune. We could live as we liked, Jane. It'd be a comfort to practice nothing but medicine for a while."

"We belong to the South, Julian. We couldn't live anywhere else."

"We've inherited a world we never made—and its troubles. Why should we burn out our lives trying to solve them?"

"Unfortunately that's our inheritance—and our destiny."

"So I must go back to the Cape Fear and insist I belong there.

Fight every rascal with an army contract. Bribe every parasite, from General Hudnall down——"

"Is that fat tyrant a general now?"

"Doesn't his appointment show how hopeless things are? There are so many tyrants in Carolina these days. How can we banish them in our lifetime?"

"We can make a start. We owe it to our children."

"If we can find time for children," he said with a lingering touch of bitterness.

Jane laughed softly there in the haven of his arms. "It doesn't take much time, you know."

"Oddly enough, I'd never considered that angle." He pressed a kiss deep in the hollow of her throat.

"And you a doctor of medicine!"

"Perhaps I'll have you back home sooner than I think."

"Perhaps, darling. One never knows." Even as she spoke he felt her arms draw him closer.

"Julian, my own—if you think I want our child less than you!"

Knowing that she must fulfill the strange duty that drew her from his side, he was not too depressed to waken in the sparkling winter sunlight and find himself alone in the tumbled wilderness of the hotel bed. Knowing, just as surely, that Jane had vanished from Washington without a trace, he did not even seek her in the room down the hall.

It had been simpler to close his trunk and turn his back on this Yankee stronghold. Far simpler to return to the grueling routine of Chisholm Hundred and pray that a compulsion greater than duty would return her to his arms again.

iv

There had been no child from their improbable union at the Willard—he was sure of that today, though it was hard to believe that all of two years had gone by since their meeting. Harder still, when he let the warm memory flood his brain, to believe that he had not dreamed his wife into that hotel suite for a night. . . .

He sighed aloud and rode into the stable yard, tossing his reins to one of Lucy's grooms. He had lived those pictures down with time,

burying himself in work, in the soothing routine of many days. With Louis Rothschild at his side he had driven Noah to Wilmington and escorted the Negro doctor aboard the New York packet. He had stood at Hoyt Marshall's side when Hoyt had disputed the bank's foreclosure on his estate, sworn that one Jason Brooke (regrettably absent in London, at the time, on bank business) was both an arsonist and a thief—and had watched the venal judge dismiss the case without the flicker of an eyelid.

Finally, he had beaten down the hungry hands, both black and white, that had sought to dismember his own estate when Thad Stevens's Reconstruction Act had become a reality. His victory had been dearly bought; and its continuing success, as usual, depended entirely on the success of his next year's crop. To say nothing of the decision he must make this evening when he faced the gathered planters of the Cape Fear. As a noncombatant in the war, Dr. Chisholm was eligible to enter the race for state senator. As a respected citizen (who had won the grudging admiration of more than one former enemy in Wilmington), Dr. Chisholm might even be elected —especially if he accepted the shadowy but powerful backing of the Ku-Klux Klan.

Acceptance, of course, would mean that he, too, must submit to initiation and accept the stern discipline of this new and secret order. Reviewing the Klan's record to date in Carolina, weighing the good with the bad, he could see no valid reason for holding aloof, though he needed the Klan's help far less than most of his counterparts in the valley.

He squared his shoulders as he faced his stable gate and the white silhouette of the house beyond. As always, his home-coming gave a lift to his spirits, helping him to forget for that instant how empty the house had been since Jane's departure. This evening he could even manage a smile for the groom who held his horse.

"When did Mrs. Sprague arrive?"

"She jes' come, Doctah."

So Lucy had planned her entrance, knowing that he seldom returned from the fields before dusk. It was odd, how much Lucy knew of his activities, when this was her first real visit to the plantation. Or perhaps it was the most natural thing in the world—when he recalled how wildly he had poured out his mind to her on that last

drunken visit to Wilmington, when his loneliness had been more than he could bear. . . . But this was no time to review his sins with Lucy Sprague. No time to insist that the magnet that drew him to her side was a passing thing—a fever of the flesh that would vanish if he could find his wife again.

He squared his shoulders under that added burden and walked quickly across the lawn to the portico. Lights starred the great drawing room within, but the expected hum of voices was strangely absent. He kicked open a french window and walked in without ceremony, hoping that his brusqueness would mask the pounding of his heart.

At first glance the smoke-wreathed room seemed empty. Then he caught the glint of firelight on glass and discerned the familiar profile of his uncle deep in his favorite armchair. Close beside him sat General Stedman, that fire-eater from the Cape Fear delta. The Cokers, Hugh and Jeff, he noted, sat grimly side by side on the smaller love seat—strange, silent brothers who stared down their ruin with bitter eyes, warlocks who were rumored to have killed more Yankees after Appomattox than before.

Hoyt Marshall stood at the hall door, all but obscured by the bulk of Judge Bowen—a venerable aristocrat whose ruined mansion still served as a landmark to vessels inbound from the harbor bar. A perfect cross section of the county's finest, thought Julian, and wondered where the rest had vanished. Hoyt answered the question before he could speak, as he came forward with Julian's bourbon.

"Mrs. Sprague is entertaining the other gentlemen in the music room," he said. "We've been cutting you up for quite a while, Julian. General Randolph and I agreed to make our offer in caucus, as it were."

"Put it simply, Hoyt," said Clayton Randolph. "We're asking Julian to be one of us, in every way."

"*Demanding* is the word, Clayton," said Jeff Coker, and his voice was a cold whiplash in the room. "Julian knows it's past time he declared himself."

"And the local Den needs a doctor—badly," said Stedman. "We aren't asking you to fight. Just to serve."

The Judge cleared his throat. "Most of all, we want the Chisholm name. Damn it all, Julian, we can't close ranks without you."

Julian stood in the midst of the room, feeling their eyes touch him

from all sides—the Judge's and Stedman's frankly pleading, the Cokers' hard with another kind of urgency. Only Clayton Randolph continued to stare down at his drink with deceptive calm. "You know why the Klan was founded, Julian. You know what it's done to—to preserve us all."

"And all of you know I don't need that sort of protection here. I have my own guards; they're trained to keep intruders from my land" —he faced the Cokers as he spoke—"and to keep out of other people's quarrels."

The brothers took the taunt with narrowed eyes; the Judge stepped forward, stilling the argument with a soothing hand. "Most of us weren't that fortunate when the war ended, Julian. Look at me—burned to the ground before I could get out of uniform. Look at your own uncle—forced to go to Yankees for his money before he could stand on his own hind legs again. . . . Hell and molasses, my boy, these rascals still outnumber us. In town they hide behind the Army. In court they hide behind the scalawags they've put in judges' robes. In Raleigh they pass a law a minute through that black legislature. Laws that'll suck the last sap from our veins if we *don't* band together."

Judge Bowen only seemed to pause for breath; it was the debater's pause, complete to dilated nostrils and tossed-back forelock. "It's human nature," he said almost gently. "It's like calling to like——"

"Answer one question, Judge, if you please. Is it right to shoot Negroes down in cold blood?"

"It's happened before in our history. God save us, it'll happen again if the black man forgets his place."

Julian glanced around the room. Something had come into those watching eyes with the Judge's words: something hungry and strangely inhuman. At that moment every man in the room might have been a prowling cat on the lookout for prey.

He remembered the stories he had heard of the Klan—the inevitable sequel when violence strides forth to meet violence. Stories of former slaves strung up by the dozens along every highroad from Richmond to Savannah. Wild tales of shanty towns put to the torch, of black wenches violated in the canebrakes, of whole terror-crazed communities where every door was barred after sundown. . . . At the same time he remembered other stories: Negro judges, too drunk

to sit upright, beating down the last hope of the South under the brassbound gavels; guerrilla bands, lashed by the rhetoric of the Loyal Leaguers, roaming the back country with billhook and lightwood torch; Scott's Constabulary in South Carolina, equipped with rifles by the Army itself, cowing the last of the planters who dared oppose the new laws from Washington.

Stedman spoke for the first time since Julian had entered the discussion, and this was the wise voice of his father's best friend, the measured opinion of a man who abhorred bloodshed in any form. "You know what saved my barns, Julian. The knowledge, spread from Wilmington to Fayetteville, that certain scoundrels would hang—and hang speedily—if a single renegade set foot on my land. I owe my last crop to the Klan, and the loyalty of every Negro in my cabins. It's a harsh discipline, I'll grant you. Can we do with less?"

"Julian is only arguing for the sake of form," said Hoyt. "In his heart he's with us now."

"I still can't agree that it's wise to fight fire with fire. Most of our Negroes aren't criminals—yet. Most of them are only clay in the hands of renegades——"

"Like Jason Brooke?" asked Hoyt.

"I'd heard that rascal is back. Is it true?"

"Quite true. And no longer in the employ of Mrs. Sprague—else she'd not be here today." The lawyer arched his brows disdainfully. "Brooke overplayed his hand on that last visit to London. Just escaped the British noose, I'm told. Naturally, neither Lucy nor Peabody could employ him any longer—so he's now an out-and-out Loyal Leaguer. Earning what he can for rabble-rousing. . . ."

Hoyt's voice went on, unheeded. Julian could still remember Brooke's reptilian stare, the dart of the white fingers toward the derringer under his left lapel. . . . It was ironic that Lucy's bodyguard should lose his place for misdeeds in London, when he had done murder, and worse, on American soil and swaggered on, unafraid.

"Why is Brooke permitted to stay in Carolina?"

"Give us time, please. We've more active enemies to handle first. Like Senator O'Brian, the gentleman we hope you'll succeed next month."

So we're back to our main motive, thought Julian. He had often wondered why O'Brian, a well-known secessionist who had turned his

coat at the last feasible moment, was resigning from the State Senate on such short notice.

"Don't tell me it was the Klan who frightened O'Brian out of Raleigh?"

"It was, indeed," said Randolph with a booming laugh. "Five bullets was all he needed."

"I thought you only used lead as a last resort."

"The bullets I refer to were left by hand," said Hoyt. "In an envelope, where O'Brian least expected to find them. In Florida, I understand, the Klan leaves orange seeds. In Texas it's dead beetles. Five bullets means five days to leave Carolina—or we send another, on the sixth day, with gunpowder behind it."

Clayton Randolph chuckled. "As you may have heard, Julian, O'Brian is now residing in Paris. He won't show his face in the South again."

"Suppose he'd refused to go?"

"They seldom do," said Hugh Coker. Again the voice had a cold, inhuman twang that set Julian's teeth on edge.

"Tell me this much, Hugh. Are you and Jeff the executioners for this Den?"

"It isn't always our privilege," said Jeff Coker. "We must share the honor."

"Then you do enjoy it?"

"Killing skunks is a pleasure, Julian—in any language."

"Doesn't it trouble you to think that you're judge, jury, and executioner—all in one?"

The Judge rumbled back into the argument: "Every known criminal receives a fair trial——"

"White and black both?"

"Jury and executioner are separate," said the Judge, ignoring the question. "If it's a hanging party, for example, we send a flying squad to do the job."

"Then your enemies are tried *in absentia*."

"Sometimes it isn't possible to bring 'em before the Den. Sometimes they do hole in and defy us——"

"I know, Judge. And then you burn them out, just as those bummers burned General Stedman's barns."

"Fire against fire, my boy. Lead against lead. It's always been the Southern way when our homes are threatened."

Julian walked to the fireplace and stood with his back to the room while he stared at the glowing coals; he could still feel their eagerness pressing him from all sides. If I rule out my crapulous uncle, he thought, these men were decent citizens before the war; ruin, and the threat of more, has made bloodhounds of them all. Who am I to say they've done wrong?

When he turned back to his friends his voice was calm enough. "When did you propose to—initiate me?"

"In a day or two," said Stedman. "Some of our Den are upriver—on special business."

"Don't tell Julian too much, General," said Hoyt with a laugh. "He isn't a member yet."

"He's one of us now," said the Judge. "He's always been one of us."

But Clayton Randolph, as head of the local Klan, had kept silent too long. "Friday will be a good day for the induction. Hoyt will conduct you to our Den, my boy—it's nearer than you think."

"I can find it myself," said Julian. "You meet in the Hollow. Where shanty town once stood."

"How did you discover that?"

"Remember, I've an efficient patrol of my own. They've observed several of your meetings from a distance."

"Tell your mountain boys to keep their heads down," roared Randolph. "They'll stop a bullet some fine evening!"

"They were merely patrolling my own land, Uncle."

"You'll need no more such nonsense when you've joined us."

"May I be the judge of that? And may I remind you that this estate has financed its own recovery, with no help from you?"

The shot went home—even the Cokers smiled thinly. It was well known in the valley that General Clayton Randolph's grandiose scheme for bloodsucking had collapsed on its fraudulent face months ago and that Julian's uncle had been forced to scuttle to the protection of Peabody, hat in hand.

"Understand me, Uncle—I'm in sympathy with the fight you're waging. But I remain my own master—and Chisholm Hundred will continue to settle its own battles, in its own way."

"No one proposes to dictate to you, Julian!" cried Stedman. But Hoyt cut in soothingly, before the others could speak:

"All we're asking is your presence as troop surgeon when we ride out on a mission. Of course you must preserve the secrets of the order——"

"Very well, Hoyt. I appreciate the honor, gentlemen." Now that he had yielded Julian felt weariness invade his very bones; he was anxious to be alone, eager for another long drink by the fire, for a long argument with Macalastair about such safe topics as drainage ditches and the maximum bribe to offer a certain Wilmington brigadier.

The Judge was the first to shake hands. "I still can't believe we've won you over, Julian. No recanting, now—word of honor?"

"I'll join the Klan, sir, and I'll run next month against the scalawags. It's a bargain."

"We must plan that campaign carefully."

"May we leave that for another day? I've been riding my swampers since dawn; I can't remember when I've been so tired."

He meant every word. When he had shaken the last hand in the doorway and stood back to let Hoyt conduct his guests to the stable yard, he would have given a great deal to drop where he stood, to sleep the sleep of exhaustion. Just in time he remembered the music room—and Lucy Sprague. He faced the closed portal warily, conscious for the first time of the threat that lurked within. It seemed obvious, now that he was indeed alone, that she had chosen to wait until the others were gone; that Hoyt's glib pretense that she was entertaining the other planters had been offered at her request.

Knowing that the time for pretense was over, he strode to the doorway and flung it wide. As he had expected, Lucy was quite alone in the tall, glacial emptiness of the room. Half seated, half reclining on the piano bench, with one arm draped along the keyboard, she had kept her sultry charms intact through the long wait. Her blond beauty had a glow of its own there in the shadows—an innocent, appealing glow, despite the elaborate rust-brown riding habit she wore. Only last night he had watched her model that habit in her Wilmington bedroom.

She might be an eager virgin, he thought wryly, daring to meet her first lover. The image persisted, even as he watched her draw deep

on the slim cigar she was smoking—a habit, so rumor said, she had acquired from a visiting Cuban politico who had come to Wilmington to buy cotton leases and had lingered to beg Lucy's favors instead.

Julian spoke curtly. "You may come out when you like. The Klansmen have departed."

"Thank you, darling. I had to know your decision the moment it was made. But I didn't want to intrude."

Lucy came into the living room, folding the voluminous folds of her habit across one gloved hand, and pausing to drop her half-smoked cigar in the fire. She made these moves deliberately, as though her presence at Chisholm Hundred were an accepted thing. Watching her hand trail lovingly along the marble carvings of the mantel, Julian knew that she was remembering the days when she had been all but mistress of this mansion—and planning for a time when she might be its mistress in fact.

"Be frank with me, Julian. Are you angry that I came here?"

"It was a planter's meeting, Lucy. You're certainly a planter of sorts."

"You're seldom witty," she said. "But I'm afraid I understand you perfectly."

He bowed from the waist, holding his smile steady; he had fenced with Lucy Sprague for a long time now without drawing blood. "You will forgive me, of course, for not inviting you formally? After all, no one had a better right to be present. You hold all our destinies in the palm of your hand."

She held out her hand as he spoke, stripping off the glove with a languid air, as though she were baring much more than her palm for his kiss. "It's a nice hand, Julian. Admit it's been nice to you."

"This is hardly the place to remind me," he said. "After all, Lucy, you're at a political meeting."

"It was a political meeting. It's just us now. And you know very well why I'm here."

"Tell me anyhow," he said through tight lips.

"This was my home once. I enjoy remembering."

"Today it's my wife's house as well as mine. As a landowner, I had no choice but to welcome you. I'm afraid you aren't exactly a—guest."

"Not even when your pale angel is absent?"

"It's still Jane's house," he said. "I must respect her visiting list."

"I know. She showed me the door back in '65. I remember the occasion well. Something tells me she won't repeat that—humiliation."

"I'll defend her if she does, Lucy."

"Don't pretend to be noble. You know she's dead."

"That I won't admit."

"How long will you be faithful to a memory?"

He turned away, yielding the point without words. Both of them knew how seldom he had been faithful during the past months.

"Have it your way, Julian. I can afford to wait." She gathered up her gloves with the words and drew her poise about her like a cloak. "Forgive me if I've offended a family convention by coming here too soon. I suppose all Chisholm men are faithful to their wives—to a point. I wouldn't know; I wasn't a Chisholm for long."

He let the challenge go and kept his face in rigid profile, avoiding her eyes. "May I wish you a safe journey to Wilmington, Mrs. Sprague?"

"May I expect you for supper—or after?"

"I'm afraid I'll be busy. With Hoyt and my overseer."

"Surely you can trust the ledgers to Hoyt by now."

"It's more important than overseers."

"If it's a question of bribing the right man, I could give you better advice than Hoyt. You know that from experience too."

He spoke through clenched teeth. "May I call your coachman, Mrs. Sprague? Your carriage must be ready now."

"I'm going, Julian," she said, and came into his arms as naturally as the devil in an unguarded moment. "I know that I've tormented you enough."

Torment, he thought savagely, is the exact word. You've served me as adequately as woman has served man since Eden. And yet you've never failed to leave me even hungrier. But it was madness to yield to self-analysis, with Lucy deep in his arms and his father's candid eyes staring down from the painted canvas on the wall. He broke free—before their kiss could quite engulf them both—and walked to the bell rope.

"Your carriage is ready now," he said. "They hadn't broken harness when I came through the stable yard."

"Tell me one thing, Julian. You need me here as much as I need Chisholm Hundred. Why can't we strike a bargain?"

"You know it was wrong to come—now."

"What about tomorrow?" she cried, seizing avidly on his final word. "Or the day after? The whole valley expects us to marry. We can't disappoint them forever."

"I've told you why we can never marry."

"But you don't object to calling at my house in Wilmington—as often as I'll receive you?"

Again he bowed to the logic of that question without argument. Man, he reflected, is a beast—and no more than a beast; women like Lucy could be relied on to turn a knife in the deepest wound. . . . How could he tell her that she had satisfied the most primitive of needs, these past months, and nothing more? How could he explain that the mere sight of her was almost more than he could bear in the time between?

"I've rung for Roy, Lucy."

"Will you come tonight? I'll be quite alone."

"Have you no shame?"

"Are you reminding me that this is your father's house—and that I was your brother's wife?" She pulled on her gloves, prolonging the action a moment, as a woman will when she has won her victory. "What if I told you that this house would be an empty cave tomorrow —if I withdrew my support?"

"I'd remind you that I've enough credits in London to handle your next mortgage. More than enough," he added with a recklessness he did not quite feel.

"It wasn't a threat, Julian," she said. "I wouldn't hurt you for the world. We've had too much—could I say pleasure without offending your Calvinist conscience?"

"Would you call me ungallant if I agreed it was pleasure—and nothing more?"

"Call it what you like," she said, and her lips were still hot on his cheek as she moved closer in the reluctant half circle of his arm. "It meant a great deal to me. You surely won't call me immodest if I suggest it's meant as much to you."

"You've been a solace, Lucy, I won't deny that."

"I can be so much more the moment you'll let me. The moment you'll put that mountain girl from your mind and divorce her in my favor." But she had already moved gracefully from his arms as Roy's

step sounded in the hall. "Words are wasted on you now, I'm sure. Just say you'll come tonight."

"If I can spare the time."

"Now you are ungallant, Julian," she said. "And untruthful. Of course you'll find time!" She went out, smiling at Roy as the aged major-domo bowed her down the hall.

Julian stood at the glass door of his drawing room to watch her phaeton dance down the driveway. The two geldings in the traces moved as precisely as brand-new toys; the grooms in the carriage box had the same sheen of newness, as though the whole equipage had been wound tight for the occasion. Lucy herself sat serene behind her coachman's whip. He was not surprised when she raised her hand and waved at the house—a gesture of possession, not of farewell.

He turned to the cellaret in the corner and drank his second bourbon of the day—a good four fingers, neat. At least I'm not tired any more, he thought grimly; she's burned away my weariness, as though it never existed. He poured another drink with trembling hands. At that moment his raw desire was more than he could bear without the insulation of alcohol.

In an hour, at most, he knew he would be roaring down the Wilmington pike—to lose yet another night in that all-too-willing embrace.

V

Drunk as a lord now, with desire behind him, like a stunned beast he reeled down Lucy's stairway into the well of darkness that lay between him and the open air. Her house was quiet tonight, he noted hazily; so far she had banned all visitors when she was sure of a rendezvous. Even when he had surprised her, when the mansion that had once been Marshall Hall roared with guests, Lucy had found ways to meet him alone in the silken tent of her bedroom. Transported *in toto* from the Hanover Hotel, that green cave had become his synonym for release, no matter how fleeting.

Her low chuckle followed him from the landing above; he glanced up just once as he fumbled for the doorknob, knowing that she would be standing there, as always, bathed in the glow of the candle she

now held high to light his departure. Her body, covered only by the cascade of her ash-blond hair, seemed to burn with a deeper light. He felt his pulses hammer with a longing that went beyond desire. An all but invincible impulse to mount those stairs again and take that slender throat between his fists . . . To choke that smile away, until her eyes grew rich as purple grapes . . .

"Tomorrow, Julian?"

The murderous impulse passed. He muttered thickly, lurching through the door where Wilmington's finest had once bowed or curtsied.

The crash of the closing door shut out the enticement above, setting the echoes bouncing in the moonlit garden; but he knew that Lucy's battalion of servants was trained to keep its distance. No one stirred in the massed pillars of the portico; he heard nothing but his horse tethered to the hitching post at the curve of the entrance and nickering softly as he detected his rider's whisky-laden presence.

Julian yawed in his saddle for a moment, unwilling to put an end to this sinning, even now. Marshall Hall stared back at him in shuttered calm. It was hard to believe that the town's first mansion was little better than a wide-open bordello today. Wilmington still bridled as it recalled a party (not too long ago) when two alleged ladies had burst from that same cloistered portico, naked as the day they were born, with a brace of gentlemen in hot pursuit. The episode had occurred in broad daylight. The ladies had not stopped until they reached the river, where they had plunged with Indian war whoops, a scant stride ahead of their pursuers.

Long before this marathon of Pan, Marshall Hall had been the scandal of Wilmington as well as its shamefaced focal point. Corks popped nightly now in the great loggia, while violins and piano sighed over a waltz. In the refreshment rooms (it was hard to say if Lucy's downstairs parlors resembled a continuous restaurant or a multiple bar) land-grabber rubbed elbows with threadbare gentry from the back-country, who had come to town in a last desperate attempt to avoid bankruptcy. Judge Bowen himself had dined here more than once when his funds were really low. Even as fine a gentleman as General Clayton Randolph could be found often at the poker table in the former library, matching bets with an army major whose amours were equaled only by his barefaced larcenies, and a strumpet

from the Hanover House, said to be a sharper famous on two continents. Here, too, it was rumored, the next reprisals of the Klan were plotted, while the current commanding general of the occupation drank deep in the next room—with the same scalawag who had just been marked for the tarbrush.

It was a tawdry, upside-down world, thought the master of Chisholm Hundred as he continued to sway drunkenly in its shadow. A world where the aristocrat of yesterday was willing to break bread with the carpetbagger; where the finest bloods in Carolina were not too proud to seek solace in lechery and wine. He had seen too many friends of his youth stagger from this same doorway in the small hours of morning to doubt the reason for their visit.

Had those friends been driven here, like himself, by simple loneliness? Or was the need far more complex—a dark compulsion to destroy a life that had not ended on a battlefield?

Try as he might, he could not feel too ashamed of his excesses with Lucy: a man alone, he insisted drunkenly, had every right to satisfy a need older than time. . . . And then, deep in his reeling brain, a small voice spoke reproachfully—and he recognized Jane's clear tone as distinctly as though his wife were standing beside him.

"Women like Lucy don't take lovers. I could forgive you a love affair while I'm away. *She* takes men for just one reason—to possess them, and all they own."

The voice faded as a red light burst in his brain, and he found that he needed all his wavering control to keep clear of the house he had just quitted and the woman in her silken lair. I mustn't go back again, he told himself. Someday, if this continues, I *will* find her throat between my fingers when this red mist clears.

At least the halt had all but sobered him. He was steady enough in his saddle when he rode across Market Street and into the tree-lined esplanade. There, precisely as he had expected, was Jason Brooke—in the shadow of the silk-cotton tree that stood across the way from Lucy's gateposts. The Englishman seemed part of the darkness at first; only the face under the tilted hatbrim was alive. Julian knew that Brooke stood there often nowadays, like a homeless cat, and that he moaned in his throat at times (like that same feline) when he watched visitors come and go after hours. It was even said that Lucy had driven her former bodyguard mad before she banished him,

but that was arrant nonsense. Brooke was merely another drunken scalawag, too dirty to cross a threshold like Marshall Hall—or so Julian reasoned now, as he rode up deliberately and met the renegade's stare head on.

"Are you paid to guard this gate, Brooke?"

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing, really. If that's a pistol under your coat, I'd advise you to leave it there. One of my men has you in his sights now."

The threat was solid enough: Lafe, riding his familiar pony, had already nosed out of a side street with a cocked army revolver pointed coldly above the pommel of his saddle. Lafe had picked up his trail often, of late, when he rode into Wilmington after too much whisky. He could hardly resent the bushwhacker's caution now that it had probably saved his life.

"Keep your distance," said Brooke thickly. "I'll keep mine."

"See that you remember that promise."

Julian wheeled his horse and thundered down the cobbles, wondering if Brooke would risk a shot even now. He heard Lafe's pony break into a hard canter just behind—and rode steadily, without looking back, until he was out of range. He felt curiously elated at his bravado. Brooke is dangerous as a coiled diamondback, he thought. Will I, too, stand outside her gate some night, aching to put a bullet through my successor?

He was cold sober long before he turned down his own driveway —and remorse, as always, sat on his shoulder like a carrion bird. Tossing his bridle to Lafe, he entered the house without a word, pausing only to glance through the clinic window, where Louis still sat reading under the night light. Since Noah Heath's departure they had reduced their hospital facilities by half, though the former slave quarters still boasted twenty beds, open to all who stood in need.

It would have been pleasant to linger awhile with Louis, to plunge deep into the safe, impersonal world of science where his friend lived so tranquilly. But he knew that a task awaited him in the library—a confessional he had postponed too long.

With the door locked behind him and the lamp turned high above his desk, he sat down to write the letter to Jane that would be both his cry for help and his expiation. He would force Lafe to deliver it

tomorrow: Lafe was still in contact with Amos and could find them somehow. He dipped his pen.

My darling Wife:

Forgive me if I break a Bargain with this letter, but my Heart is too full for Silence.

It is now over Two Years since our chance Meeting in Washington. I am sure that you know more of my Activities than I can ever know of yours. Including my Relations with Lucy Sprague.

If I told you that I was driven to her by Loneliness, by your Long Silence, by my Doubting and my Frustration, I would be telling less than the Whole Truth. Lucy has always been my Evil Lodestar—and I fear she will so continue until the day she Dies.

Had you remained at my Side, we could have fought down that pull together: I am as positive of that as my Hope of Heaven. If you will return to me now—if you will come soon, my Own Darling—I know I can put that Part of my Life behind me, finally and forever.

I have waited for you nearly Three Years, Jane, just as I waited for you through the War. I cannot wait much longer. . . .

His pen stuttered, then slowed to a dead halt. What, in God's name, did that last sentence mean? That he would take his own life or permit Lucy to destroy him piecemeal? That he would divorce Jane and make Lucy the mistress of Chisholm Hundred, legally and in fact?

Lucy had offered to arrange that divorce more than once. Lucy had judges in her stable (along with generals, congressmen, and paid assassins) who would do anything. . . . He tossed the pen aside and watched his fist crumple the letter into a crinkled mass. The night lamp shuddered and nearly went out as he lifted the chimney and applied the jerky flame to a corner of the paper.

He sat for a while watching the fire dance in the glass of a facing bookcase as his cry for help burned down to ash. Strangely enough, the fire seemed to grow in that dark mirror long after the last of the letter had crumbled in his hands. He blinked and looked again, realizing that the glass had picked up the reflection from the lawn outside. There was a rifle crack in the dark and a shouted warning. As he stepped to the window he saw Lafe move across the portico and repeat his shout, knew that his other guards had snapped to attention like a single man.

The flame was still blurred by the live oaks along the drive, though it was moving steadily nearer, despite the bushwhacker's warning shot. Then he saw the first rider burst into view, with the blazing cross held high above his nightmarish robes. Another followed, and another, until a dozen mounted Klansmen had fanned out on the lawn.

The night riders sat immobile in their saddles, their white robes flowing almost to the ground, their tall, conical hats precise as geometric patterns against the darkness. No one stirred for a moment as the blazing lightwood cross threw the whole scene into garish relief. The bushwhacker guard, outnumbering the visitors two to one, waited for orders, their rifles ready.

"What say, Doc? Shall I let these nightshirts in?"

Lafe had spoken without turning. Julian stepped through the open window and walked boldly across the lawn into the blaze of the torch. More Klansmen had ridden into view as he approached—some in black robes, others in red. He saw now that a litter swung between two of the horses and heard a muffled groan in the darkness.

"Stay where you are, gentlemen," he said coolly. "Will you state your business?"

The cross-bearer spoke: Julian recognized Hugh Coker's voice, grotesquely normal in that overtheatrical masquerade. "It's the general, Julian. He's been hit bad."

"My uncle?"

Coker's snort was eloquent. "Clayton stayed home. It was General Stedman who led the Den tonight. We have him on that litter."

"Bring him to the clinic door. You know where it is. You can let them through, Lafe. They're my friends—though they don't look it at the moment."

The bushwhackers watched in silence while the litter-bearers rode forward. Hugh Coker, driving his flaming torch into the lawn, dismounted to give a hand at the clinic door. Louis had already come outside to assist, and Julian saw that the Jewish doctor's face was impassive as he bent above the wounded man. This would not be the first Klansman they had treated in the surgery. It was merely the first time the night riders had appeared in full regalia.

Stedman was wearing a black robe with red facings; the plume of his conical hat brushed the dust as he was carried from litter to surgery. The plume was a badge of office, signifying that its wearer

was a hero among these looming ghosts, a Cyclops with the power of life and death. There was nothing remotely heroic about the old general when the robes had been stripped aside and Louis's scalpel had cut away the cloth around the bullet hole deep in the right thigh.

"You can send your men away, Hugh," said Julian. "Dr. Rothschild and I will handle this."

Hugh Coker barked an order, and the sheeted figures vanished as though they were actual phantoms. Only a group of plumed leaders waited at the surgery door. Julian stared at each in turn as he waited for Louis and the two Negro assistants to prepare the patient. At this distance there was something familiar about each of them—something strangely undramatic. Already he had recognized Hoyt Marshall's London riding boots under a tucked-up robe.

"Tell Hoyt to take his friends inside for a drink," said Julian, affably enough. "You might have one yourself, Hugh. My guess is you've earned it."

Coker took a step forward. "Some of us don't trust you even now, Julian. We'd rather watch."

"Sorry, I don't operate for an audience. You may clear out instantly or take your patient away."

Hugh shrugged and swept over to the tightly knit group in the doorway. There were a few whispered words and a muttered oath, then the Klansmen moved reluctantly toward the house, with Hoyt's riding boots twinkling in the van.

Louis spoke quietly from the table. "Patient ready, Doctor."

"Is it bad?"

"Bad enough. You may have to amputate."

Stedman, he saw, had fainted while they prepared him—and for good reason. The wound was both dangerous and painful, for the bullet had entered the upper thigh, just below the groin. Blood loss, however, had been moderate so far; it was clear that the shot had not entered the great trunk artery of the leg, and the spasmodic twitching of the right foot proved that the nerve was undamaged. A block in circulation was equally obvious. The skin was wax-pale, and when Julian sought for the pulse beneath the anklebone, it was almost nonexistent. Something in that deep-bored wound was impeding the pulse of the artery. Unless the obstruction was removed, gangrene would surely follow, and Stedman would lose his leg. As Louis had

indicated, it might be simpler to amputate now and accept the inevitable.

Could the bullet, stopped by the thigh bone, be pressing on the artery? Or had a clot formed around that leaden pellet, producing the same result? There was, of course, a worse possibility—that the bullet had partly penetrated the artery wall and, still in place, kept the rupture closed. Since the bullet must come out in any event, he would have to risk the last threat, knowing in advance that the resultant hemorrhage could easily be fatal.

"We'll probe first, Louis. You'd best set up for an amputation later, in case we fail."

"Must you amputate, Julian?"

It was Stedman's voice, pitched in the barest of whispers. Both Louis and Julian turned to soothe back a patient half lifted on an elbow.

"We're saving that leg if we can, sir."

"I know you will, my boy. I saw you operate in Richmond." But Stedman's eyes moved bleakly to Louis Rothschild and back again to Julian. The general had served with honor through the whole war; he had seen too many surgeons at work in the field to overestimate his chances. "Strange, isn't it, that I could campaign four years without a nick—and stop a bullet now?"

"How did it happen?"

"We'll never know. I was leading a routine patrol down-river. Some coward fired from the dark." The old general spoke through thin lips as pain tightened about the wound. "Go after it, Julian. You can filch out that lead if anyone can."

"We're putting you to sleep first."

The taut lips relaxed in a smile. "We weren't always so fortunate in the field. The Klan can use you—in many ways."

Louis was waiting at the head of the table with the cone of chloroform-soaked cotton between his hands. Julian had already slipped a loose tourniquet high up on the injured leg; he tested the area around the bullet hole with exploring fingers and nodded to Louis, who brought the cotton mask down on the Cyclops' mouth and nose.

Stedman fought against the anesthetic for a while; then, as his breathing snored off into a deep, regular rumble, he seemed to relax in earnest under the steadying hands of the two black mates.

"Patient fully anesthetized, Doctor."

The scalpel was already in Julian's hand, but he put it down and reached for a probe instead. The slender rod, forged in England, was tipped with a spot of porcelain, whose grating would betray a bullet's presence instantly. Invaluable to a field surgeon, it had saved lives for him often when he worked under fire.

"The wound seems clean, Louis. I'm going in at once."

The porcelain tip had already vanished in the bubbling crater of flesh. Working it deeper with careful hands, he let the sensitive steel find its own path along the groove the bullet had made. When two inches or more of probe had disappeared, he felt the unmistakable grating shiver of porcelain on lead. He could even discern the faint pulse of the artery along the steel; it was obvious that the bullet lay directly against the vessel.

The probe eased from the wound, its work of detection over; the scalpel entered, cutting above and below the bullet hole, opening the pallid fat that masked the muscle sheath. Here, as he had expected, he encountered little bleeding, mute evidence of the condition around the artery. A pledget of linen anchored the limit of the incision. Louis had already ranged a small battery of forceps on the side table as an added precaution.

"Shall I tighten the tourniquet, Julian?"

"In a moment. I want to be sure of my ground."

Even here the wound seemed clean enough, though he could trace the jagged furrow where the bullet had pierced the muscle sheath and the blackened, blood-matted surface of the muscle itself, already thrusting into the opening he had made. The knife excised the damaged tissue in a few clean strokes; a thrust of the blunt handle separated the pinkish muscle fibers neatly.

Now, at last, he could observe the feeble throb of the vessel in the depths of the wound, with the darker sheen of the thin-walled vein that paralleled it. He worked down the artery gently, removing the blood clots that had formed beneath the resistant muscle sheath, tending ever downward to the dangerous bullet itself.

When his fingers found the blob of lead, he saw that his fears were justified; jammed, as it was, against the very wall of the artery, he could not risk a dislodgment at this moment. Louis's own fingers were moving busily, packing pledgets in the wound; Julian yielded

his place to the other doctor and went to the chloride basin to rinse his fingers while he thought the problem out.

"As bad as that, Julian?"

"We'll need that tourniquet after all."

He watched Louis tighten the rope about the upper thigh, inching the cylindrical pad into the groin itself to make the cutoff absolute. Back in the depths of the wound, he could feel the artery pulse go faint, then die. Now, at least, the bullet could come out safely. If the artery wall was damaged beyond repair, they could proceed at once with clamp and bone saw, though a hip-high amputation was, in itself, an invitation to gangrene.

The slender-jawed forceps followed his fingers, rocking along the artery until one of the jaws grated on the lead. He tested the grip gently, knowing that metal tended to slip on metal; when he felt the clamp fasten on its quarry, he began to rock the bullet in its bed, making the forceps an extension of his testing fingers. At first the bullet seemed immovable as the tense flesh surrounding it, and he risked a slightly harder pressure. Then he felt the lead give a little, felt it lift cleanly from its bed and rise with the forceps from the deep groove it had made.

He laid the pellet on the table—an irregular, rounded piece of metal, blunted by its impact against the bone deep in the leg. But this was no time to study the bullet: he knew that he must proceed with his check on the blood vessel itself and the extent of its damage. Separating the ragged muscle fibers, he swabbed away the last clot to hinder full vision. The artery had been pushed out of normal position by the shot, but it seemed reasonably intact from this angle. It was logical to hope that it had escaped damage entirely. Spent by contact with the thigh bone, the bullet had obviously lost much of its power.

He probed deeper, testing the surface of the bone itself. There was no sign of telltale splintering, no need for surgery in that area. If the artery wall held firm, General Stedman would soon walk again. He was ready for his final test.

"Loosen the tourniquet, please."

Louis let out the twisted rope, notch by notch. With a forceps in his free hand, Julian stood guard above the wound, ready to clamp at the first spout of blood; his fingers filched the pledgets from the

wound, inserting fresh swabs along the track of the bullet to take up the last of the ooze which always followed the loosening of a tourniquet. Louis lifted the tight-rolled pad from the groin; they drew breath in unison as the wound continued to gape up at them cleanly, with no show of red in its depths.

"I think we can stop the chloroform, Louis."

The artery was throbbing at its normal rate, sending the life-giving blood into the extremity. Already they could note a change in the skin tone as surrounding vessels took up their task. Julian held his watch at the table's head, letting ten heartening minutes tick by with no change in the picture. When he dared to test the pulse at the anklebone, it was close to normal.

"Shall I close the wound, Doctor?"

"I think it's quite safe."

Julian turned to the surgery door, feeling a small shiver that had nothing to do with the winter's night outside. Now that the emergency was over he would have given a great deal to linger here. But this, after all, was Louis's domain, and he could not suggest they change places tonight. His colleague, with his natural hatred for mumbo-jumbo, would never enter the house while masked men sat drinking before the fire.

"You'll excuse me if I join my guests?"

Louis glanced up briefly from his work. "Gladly, Julian. I can't say I enjoyed tonight's visit."

"I know that, Louis. I'm still afraid I must ride with them hereafter. As you saw tonight, they'll have need of me."

The Jewish doctor studied the snoring patient under his hands. "I'm glad we saved Stedman. He's a good man. Many good men go riding with the Klan these days; I'm aware of that. But most of them aren't worth saving."

"Will you let me discover that for myself?"

"Ask Lafe, if you don't believe me. Or look in any of your field hands' cabins. You won't see a black face on this plantation tonight outside my surgery. Every Negro in Chisholm Hundred took to the woods when he saw that cross come down your drive."

"Our Negroes have nothing to fear from the Klan."

"Perhaps you're right, Julian. That's something else you can discover with time."

Louis did not look up again from his bandaging as Julian walked slowly out of the surgery.

vi

The tall white cone fitted his head perfectly; the white dolman, with its flaring skirts and nail-studded belt, draped him in precise folds from shoulder to heel. For a half-hour now he had waited under the mimosa tree on the edge of the Hollow and watched the members of the Den milling on the grass beyond in preparation for tonight's activities. Look at me from any angle, he thought—I'm a model ghost, ready to frighten red-necks out of their wits. It's only natural that I should feel my own identity ebbing away, as though I were indeed an avenging wraith with no personal will.

He had ridden into the swamp with Hoyt Marshall at his side; Lafe and the bushwhacker troop had stopped precisely on the boundary line of his estate, letting the two go on ahead without their usual escort. The ghostly conclave had been waiting to proceed with his initiation—some fifty Klansmen in all, each man masked to the eyes.

The whole Den had stood rigidly at attention as the ceremonial fire was lighted and the Cyclops stepped forward to begin the oath of induction. It was wrong, of course, to recognize Clayton Randolph under those red-dyed robes, to be sure that it was the Coker brothers who flanked him, and to identify the familiar, bulky silhouette of Judge Bowen astride an ancient cavalry charger just outside the goblin leap of the flames. Julian had reminded himself one more time that these were not men but phantom patrollers, dedicated to the good of the South. . . . Fragments of the creed, which his uncle had intoned in an orotund basso, still echoed in his mind. He let his lips form the phrases now while he awaited the summons to join the mission:

"This is an institution of Chivalry, Humanity, Mercy, Patriotism. . . . Its object is to protect the defenseless, to succor the suffering—especially the widows and the orphans of Confederate soldiers . . . to protect our people and our land from unlawful seizure. . . ."

Who, when the need was so overwhelming, could object to such a creed? The white robes and flambeaux, the mystic ritual of grip and

password, the melodrama of death symbols, the resounding titles of the leaders—all this seemed justified in that firelit moment, with the massed jungle at their back and silence like a cloak over all. The silence had been earned, he knew: when the Den rode here for its meetings, every swamper within miles fled for his life. If bummer and ex-slave had once howled with drunken laughter in this same Hollow, not even the memory remained tonight.

Hoyt Marshall was approaching at last, leading their horses across the grass, where the moonlight lay in a bath of quicksilver. He knew that it was Hoyt, for he had watched him don his robes a few moments ago; the lawyer made a bizarre figure in that bath of moonlight. Thanks to the conical hat he wore, he seemed ten feet tall; even in the moonlight Julian could note the circling bands of white and red flannel that writhed about its tip like snakes, giving it the appearance of a gigantic dunce's cap. Hoyt's robe was dead black, with deep gorings to show the red lining. A row of tin circlets gleamed in the moonlight, making a cabalistic design from hem to shoulder. The yellow plume, rising proudly from the peak of the hat, proclaimed his rank—and, to the new member beneath the mimosa tree, seemed to brush the night sky.

As his friend drew closer Julian saw that the black mask covering his face resembled nothing more than a hangman's cap, despite the afterthought of the red circles that surrounded the eyeholes. At that moment Hoyt was both grotesque and terrifying; Julian knew that he was laughing and quaking in the same breath.

"Newcomer, prepare to join your Den!"

He heard a roar from the massed Klansmen in the Hollow. A dozen torches tossed skyward as the night riders welcomed him in their midst. Hoyt had already swung into his saddle, tossing Julian's bridle with a gesture. Even the horses, he saw, were robed for the occasion. Trappings of black cloth (looped, now, to keep clear of the hoofs) swept down below the saddle girths, from mane to tail, and a weirdly dyed mask for the animal's head swung ready at the pommel.

Judge Bowen rode to the head of the column, with Clayton Randolph close behind; Julian studied the two familiar figures closely and saw that Bowen was now in command, even before the first order was passed down. It was quite like his uncle to assume the role of Cyclops at these meetings and trust the hazardous raiding to others.

The night's business, he gathered, was routine. The main group of riders would proceed at once to the house of a scalawag named Brink, a notorious bloodsucker whom Julian had often ordered from the estate because of Brink's work among his field hands.

A half dozen scouts would work along the turnpike in the meantime, to pin down several Negro marauders who had terrorized travelers in the outskirts of Wilmington.

Brink's house stood just off the highroad, not more than a mile from the rendezvous. Even as they approached, Julian could see that the place was shuttered and bolted, like a compact fortress; he could sense the scalawag's presence within, guess that he was watching with sick, animal eyes as the cavalcade swept through his gate. Some of the horses took the low fence in a bound. Again the newcomer was impressed by the hard-riding skill of these intrepid men and guessed that most of these mounts, like their riders, had trained in a cavalry command.

"Does he know we're coming?"

Hoyt, driving his own horse at a gallop, laughed aloud above the hard rhythm of the hoofs. "If you ask me, he's hiding down-cellar."

A whispered command reined in the troop one by one, until the Den formed a wide half circle, with Brink's door as its center. A second command brought every rider to the ground; horses were masked and led forward, every fifth man taking a set of bridles. The others moved ahead in an open formation, unlimbering rifles and pistols. Julian heard the hard, triple click of cocking triggers, the *ku-klux-klan* that was said to have inspired the naming of the order.

A whisper halted the half circle just short of the house itself; a colloquy ensued among the leaders, and the Cyclops himself went forward with a sealed envelope in his hand. From where he stood Julian could see that his uncle Clayton's bearing was anything but martial at this moment. He smiled, thinking how the former brigadier must bless the robe that covered his quaking knees.

Rifles covered Brink's porch from a dozen angles, but there was no shot or sign of life. The Cyclops' gloved hand described an arc, sending the envelope against the door.

"Five bullets," said Hoyt's whisper. "Five days to head North. My guess is that Brink has packed already."

There was a concerted rush for the waiting horses: a long-drawn

rebel yell cut the darkness with its high, thin keening. The Den was off again, riding at top speed for its rendezvous with the scouts.

Julian, dogging the end of that driving column, could admire its bizarre beauty under the high white moon. The grotesquerie of his initiation, the absurd posturings of individuals could be forgotten now that the troop was in action. Watching the lightwood torches flare out ahead, he wondered if frightened eyes were peering from the houses they passed; if other scalawags than Brink would take warning and depart without a death sign on their doorstep.

At the rendezvous point their scouts were ready to report. The marauders (marked men on the Klan's list) were camping in a tobacco barn around the next bend. One of the Klansmen had scouted the terrain and reported that the thieves, a half dozen in all, were sleeping the sleep of the drunkard.

"That means smoke," said Hoyt. "We must wake 'em first if we're to scare 'em."

The colloquy among the leaders was more violent this time. The Cyclops, Julian gathered, had already voted for death—or at least for a single hanging—as an example to the county. Judge Bowen ruled otherwise, since this was, after all, only a first warning, and the marauders were accused of neither murder nor rape. There would be no killing except in self-defense.

Again the column formed a wide arc to converge on the tobacco barn—a high-stilted ruin that had been a kind of scarecrow landmark on the turnpike even before the war. Masked to the eyes, men and horses moved slowly now in well-disciplined silence. Just before they reined in, a tar-soaked cross burst into flame at each wing of the line, swept forward as the rider spurred his mount, and sank quivering into the earth.

Outlined by that double gush of flame, the barn seemed like a gigantic misshapen coffin riding between earth and sky on its rotting stilts. Julian heard a sound within, as though rats were scurrying helplessly for cover. A hum of frightened voices lapsed instantly to silence.

"*Renegades!*"

The stentorian voice seemed to burst from nowhere. Julian turned in his saddle and saw that his uncle had lifted a huge speaking trumpet to his lips; this time it was evident that the Cyclops was enjoying his role.

"Black sons of Satan! Do you hear me? Come forth and receive the justice you deserve!"

Silence answered from the barn.

"First volley," said the Judge quietly. "Keep it high, boys. Through the roof."

The rifle cracks had a military precision. Shingles rained down from the rooftree, letting patches of moonlight through.

"Take those crosses in!"

A pair of dark-cloaked riders swooped, lifting the burning brands from the earth and tossing them expertly, so that both torches fell just under the sagging joists of the barn, in the tangle of bone-dry brambles that grew around the foundation stones. The flames that jetted skyward seemed to mount the sides of the barn like nimble lizards.

The first scared voice wavered through the smoke almost before the two Klansmen could return to their column.

"Don' shoot! Us comin' out!"

"Single file," barked the Judge. "Hands up! Look sharp, or you'll be roasted."

Six Negroes filed out of the building and crossed the bramble patch with their hands in the air. All of them shambled rather than walked; all of them stared in eyeball-rolling terror at the ghostly circle. One of the Klansmen had already handed the Cyclops a scroll. Julian's uncle now rode forward majestically to intone the names of their prisoners and their crimes.

"Sam Craig, do you plead guilty to these offenses against law and order?"

The Negro howled like a dog that cringes from habit before the lash can fall. Dust rose in a cloud about him as he dropped to his knees, his knotted hands raised in a plea for mercy. It was all too evident that he expected to be shot instantly and had scarcely heard the question.

"Sparrow Hawkins, step forward. . . . Ted Slocum . . ."

The list continued, rolled out in Randolph's best platform manner, until all six Negroes knelt in a shivering row before their self-appointed judges. The crimes listed included nearly everything but murder and rape. Had these been mentioned, Julian now realized, death by hanging (on a tree in full view of the turnpike) would have been an automatic penalty.

"This is your first warning," intoned the Cyclops. "It will be your last in this county. Tonight you will proceed to the line—where a warning will be given to our brothers to watch you carefully. Unless you are out of North Carolina in a week, your lives will be forfeit. Is that clear?"

A confused murmur of assent rose from the dust. One by one the Negroes staggered to their knees and broke for the turnpike in a ragged run.

"Faster!" roared Randolph. "Remember, we're right behind you."

A squad of Klansmen rode out at his signal, prodding the culprits into a brisk trot. No one stirred in the arc of silent horsemen as captured and captors turned down a side road that led south to the county line. Then Judge Bowen lifted his arm, a gesture that was repeated by other leaders down the line.

In a flash the white half circle formed into a tight square and cantered briskly to the highroad, where it broke into well-rehearsed segments. These, in turn, dissolved into single units as the group proceeded to backtrack from Wilmington. Within a mile the Klan had melted from the road as individuals whipped off their robes, stuffed the regalia in their saddlebags, and resumed the guise of planters. But even as he stripped off his own masquerade Julian noticed that a dozen horsemen, driving ahead at a faster pace than the others, had kept their costumes intact.

Judge Bowen turned off at his gateway, and they dropped the Cyclops himself at the entrance to Randolph Hall. Hoyt and Julian rode side by side thereafter, alone with the moonlight and their own thoughts. The knot of robed horsemen had vanished long ago in a thunder of hoofbeats.

"Say it," Hoyt ordered at last. "You aren't one of us, even now."

"You heard me take the oath."

"I did indeed. Let me remind you that a man doesn't resign from the Klan as he does from a club."

"So far I've no intention of resigning. And I do approve what I saw tonight."

"I didn't," said Hoyt. "If I'd been in command there'd be black fruit swinging outside that tobacco barn. Your uncle would have given the order—if it hadn't been for Bowen. The old Judge is pretty con-

servative. In fact, he's almost as bad as the invalid Cyclops who's waiting for us at home."

"Perhaps the Klan needs more men like Bowen and Stedman and fewer fire-eaters like yourself."

"I happen to be a realist. The more dead scalawags, the more power for you and me. And don't say we aren't fitted to use it. I've learned my lesson from the war."

"You should have joined that group ahead."

"You don't miss much, my friend," said Hoyt.

"They aren't ending the evening, I'm sure."

"There's nothing to prevent good friends riding together——"

"For a little private murder among people they don't like personally?"

Hoyt shrugged as they galloped into the Chisholm drive—the shrug of a cynic who knows that most men are born evil. "Remember this, Julian. When a Cyclops disbands a local Den, his responsibility ends. What individuals do thereafter is their business——"

"Not if it's done in uniform."

"Since when has a nightshirt been a uniform? It's an emergency disguise, no more. Ruffians are bound to wear it, along with gentlemen——"

"Then why did you lure me into the Klan?"

"Because I hope to see you elected to the state Senate in a few weeks' time. Because I think you can't miss, with Paul Saunders whooping for you in Wilmington and the Klan bringing you votes in the back country."

They dropped from their horses and stumped tiredly across the stable yard toward the light that always burned in Louis Rothschild's surgery. "I still insist the good outweighs the bad, Julian," said the lawyer. "I still say it's the duty of every landowner to join our night riders until——"

A scream cut through the smooth purr of his discourse—the long-drawn wail of a man whose agony is too great to be borne. Julian moved instantly toward the surgery door, guessing the reason for that sound.

"Louis must be operating. I'll see if I can assist."

"Shall I come with you?"

"An excellent idea, Hoyt."

A man sat hunched on the surgery steps; he stirred resentfully as Hoyt and Julian entered. Julian had a brief, disturbing glimpse of red-rimmed eyes and a fanatic's mouth, tight-clamped in a wilderness of beard. He forgot that malevolent glance when he entered the surgery and read the concern in Louis Rothschild's face.

"This is a bad one, Doctor. I'm afraid it's beyond our help."

"When did he come in?"

"An hour ago—by boat, from an upriver farm. The man outside is his brother. He wants to talk to you afterward."

The patient on the table screamed again. Julian nodded his approval as Louis came out of the dispensary with an opiate. It took their combined efforts to force the drug between the man's clenched teeth.

"He's going into coma fast," said Louis. "As you'll see, I've done what I could. But you'd best examine him too, for the record."

Hoyt Marshall continued to lean in the surgery doorway, twirling his riding crop. "We thought you were operating, Louis."

"This patient was operated on some time ago," said the Jewish doctor. "Not too skillfully, I'm afraid. A farrier would have done a better job."

"What do you mean?"

"See for yourself, Hoyt. It may be instructive. The man outside insists it was done by the Klan."

Julian had turned back the sheet as Louis spoke; he heard the lawyer retch and knew that Hoyt had staggered from the room, sickened by what he saw. Schooled as he was in the clinics of Europe, and familiar with mutilations of every sort, Julian himself could only gasp in horror at the wound. Louis had described it accurately: a farrier, adept in the barnyard art of castrating a pig, would have done a cleaner job. By some miracle the brutal knife had severed no vital vessel. But infection had followed in its wake, staining the open wound with its white exudate, all but bursting the surrounding tissue with the fiery red of erysipelas.

"Blood poisoning," said Julian. "You're right, Louis. It's all but hopeless."

"As you see, I lanced where I could. But it's gone too long. What more can we do?"

"Keep up the hot packs and continue the opiates as needed."

They studied the patient together for a while as Julian tested the pulse. It was racing from the fever in the blood stream; the abdomen muscles resisted his fingers like a board. It was evident that peritonitis had already complicated the picture; the threat of pneumonia was also evident in the rapid, shallow breathing. The microbes of Pasteur, introduced into the wound by the brutal hands of the mutilator, had found fertile ground. Julian had seen the same picture too often in the obstetrical clinic at Vienna, where mothers still died like flies from childbed fever—and in the surgeries, where contaminated hands had produced the same results. Tonight he was seeing it in another, cruder form.

"When did it happen, Louis?"

"Three days ago. He won't last much longer."

"Why wasn't he brought in sooner?"

"It seems he was alone on the farm when it happened."

"Upriver, you said?"

"At Catfish Bend. You must know the country."

Julian nodded soberly. Catfish Bend was a stretch of pine barrens peopled mostly by poor-white truckers who wrested the best living they could from the sandy soil. Since the war, he knew, it had become a kind of back-country hotbed for local agitators, who still sought to turn the war's aftermath into a state-wide revolution of class against class. He could well believe that the Klan had ridden often through Catfish Bend, if only to frighten the rabble-rousers back to Wilmington. It seemed incredible that this ghastly mutilation could be the work of his local Den.

"What's the man's name?"

"Asa Sanderson. You've heard of his brother, Hume."

They worked as they talked, moving their fast-sinking patient to a bed in an isolation room just off the surgery, making him as comfortable as circumstances allowed. Julian frowned at this new revelation. The Sandersons, feckless poor whites who had come in with the backwash of the armies, were Georgians by birth, declamatory by nature, and failures to their marrow bones. Establishing themselves on their small backwoods farm (purchased, it was rumored, with carpetbag aid), they had run promptly into debt. Clinging to the ragged edge of subsistence, they had both moved gradually into politics, spelling each other at the scalawag-ridden legislature. Asa

had just returned from Raleigh for a vacation; it was an open secret that he had planned to stump the county in his brother's behalf when Hume Sanderson became the carpetbag candidate for Senator O'Brian's vacant seat.

"Why did Sanderson bring his brother here?"

Louis looked mildly shocked. "The poor devil had to be treated somewhere. We can't refuse medical aid just because a man's our natural enemy."

An unspoken thought crossed Julian's mind; again he shook his head gravely. It was an open secret that both Sandersons kept Negro mistresses on their farm; some neighbors insisted that the women were the brothers' legal wives. If this were really true, Asa Sanderson's wound took on a new significance.

"Can they really pin this on the Klan?"

"I think you'd better talk to the brother, Julian."

"Will you stand by the patient?"

"Of course. I hardly think he'll last till morning."

Julian walked out through the dispensary, calling Hoyt Marshall to his side with a gesture. The lawyer, still white to the eyes, had helped himself to a glass of brandy from the bottle that always stood ready on the medicine shelf. Now he put the glass down and followed Julian to the door. Hume Sanderson still waited on the steps, immobile as a rough-hewn idol.

"Well, Doc? Is he dead, or dyin'?"

The man's voice had a deep, musical tone, a consonantal slurring that went oddly with his wolflike muzzle and the hot hatred in his eyes. Julian had heard that same voice more than once as it screamed riot at Wilmington street corners. Studying his adversary at close quarters, he saw that Hume Sanderson was far less rustic than he seemed. There's at least a smattering of education here, thought Julian—a schoolmaster of sorts under that ambush of poor man's whiskers. A born demagogue, wise enough to take on the color of his surroundings, clever enough to act his part to the hilt.

"It's a murderous wound, Mr. Sanderson."

"Murder's the word for it, Chisholm." The red-neck leaped to his feet with all the precision of an opening jackknife; in that flash he was addressing a full audience, though only Hoyt and Julian were present. "And murder's the label for the cowards who kill in masquerade——"

"Be careful of your words. If you're accusing the Klan——"

"Your Mr. Marshall knows whom I'm accusing. I'd take odds he was there when they moved in on poor Asa."

"Hold your tongue!" shouted Hoyt. "You can't prove a word of this——"

"Asa counted a dozen night riders, all in the robes of the Klan."

"But Dr. Rothschild says your brother was alone when he was attacked." Julian went on with rising anger as Sanderson tried to cut in. "Why think the Klan is your only enemy? You may have others who chose the same disguise."

Sanderson pounced on the point triumphantly. "So you admit you are my enemy—and a Klansman to boot?"

"Don't answer that, Julian!" cried Hoyt.

"I've no intention of answering it. Mr. Sanderson, I'll ask you to remember that this is a free clinic—to which you came of your own accord. Both Dr. Rothschild and I will bend every effort to save your brother. But I must warn you that our task is well-nigh hopeless——"

"Course it's hopeless. I already said my good-by to Asa. Want to know the real reason I brought him here? So the whole county will know just who murdered him, and why."

"Be careful what you say!"

"Oh, I'm not accusin' you—not yet. You might even be a decent sort, Chisholm, if you had different friends. If you knew what really goes on outside your gateposts——"

The demagogue's voice dripped with pity now, and Julian knew that this was but a foretaste of the rough-and-tumble he must expect if he stood for election. "Never mind what you know and don't know. Next few days a dead wagon will call for Asa at this door. Me and mine, we'll see to it that his funeral's right public. We'll let the county know that the Klan's ready to do murder because a man's broad-gauged enough to love both white and black."

The wolf muzzle thrust forward; Julian, forcing himself to hold his ground, felt his nerves knot with revulsion. This, he thought, is not the honest sweat of toil; this is the acid sweat of hate, the reek of back-country stills, the mingled aura of sloth and rustic sinning. The man's a bastard in the truest sense; he should be stamped back to the mud that spawned him.

He pulled back in earnest, appalled by his own instinctive hate,

and knowing how closely that sort of hate could skirt the violence he had just treated in his own surgery.

"Sure we've black wives!" shouted Hume. "Both Asa and me. Sure he took his to Raleigh last time he went. What's more, the day'll come—and we'll vote it into being, by God!—when my wife sits on that portico yonder and your Mr. Marshall brings us our drinks——" The wolf muzzle was flecked with foam now; for an instant Julian was positive that Sanderson would collapse in a fit. But the demagogue's voice was oddly gentle when he spoke again.

"You see, Chisholm, we *really* love our black brothers—and sisters. We mean to pay back their slavery with interest." He turned on his heel with that and marched into the darkness of the driveway. Lafe spoke from the depths of that same darkness.

"All right, Doc?"

"Were you watching?"

"Every minute, sure. Seemed only fair to let him speak his piece."

"You're right, Lafe," said Julian soberly. "It was no more than fair." And yet, he thought desperately, how could he be fair to men like Sanderson, even in Utopia?

Hoyt broke off his soft-voiced cursing and addressed Lafe sharply: "Keep that red-neck off the land in future——"

"Got to let him collect his brother. Don't we, Doc?"

"There's no harm in that."

"There'll be plenty of harm," said the lawyer. "Wait'll you see the orgy he makes of that funeral." He tucked an arm through Julian's and led him toward the house. "Still sorry you're a Klansman, my friend?"

"Tell me truly, Hoyt. Was the Klan responsible for that mutilation?"

"It's something we'll never know. But there's poetic justice in it, just the same."

"It was the work of a fiend. Face the facts, Hoyt!"

"I'm facing them squarely. It's you who evade the issue. That fellow meant every word tonight. He and his swamper friends *will* sit in our homes someday if we show them mercy now."

"You're still my friend, Hoyt. But I think you've said enough."

"Have it your way, Julian. My guess is you've learned a great deal tonight. I hope the lesson sticks."

Asa Sanderson surprised his doctors by outlasting his first night in the clinic, and his second. Late on the second afternoon body and soul parted company—with the usual banshee wailings from the reluctant flesh.

Julian was in the swamp when death came, supervising the construction of the last drainage ditch; he rode fast to the clinic when he received Louis's summons. Together they examined the fever-tortured body, twisted in its final agony: legs, groin, and abdomen, at the moment, resembled a purple-red balloon about to take off for heaven under its own monstrous inflation.

"We know we did all that was possible," said Louis. "What will the patient's brother say?"

"Have you sent word to Catfish Bend?"

Louis just escaped smiling. "Lafe rode out with the message two hours ago. I felt we should give them time to—make all arrangements."

"Fair enough. Will you ask one of the hands to ride to Bowen's Bluff and bring the Judge here at once? I'll call Stedman in the meantime. Fortunately he was able to leave his bed today."

"What do you have in mind, Julian?"

"An object lesson, no more. If I may quote our friend Hoyt, I hope the lesson sticks."

As it happened, the lesson was blunted by circumstance. Judge Bowen was in Wilmington that afternoon; when he rode into Chisholm Hundred, the dust of Hume Sanderson's funeral cortege was already portentous on the turnpike—though the bunting-draped buckboard was still empty, and Sanderson himself (bowed like a classic Prometheus under the burden of his grief) seemed unaware of his surroundings as the vanguard wound sluggishly into the driveway.

"In God's name, Julian, what is this riffraff doing on the estate?"

"The answer is waiting in the surgery, sir. If you'll follow me——"

The Judge, puffing like an overworked bellows in his saddle, descended with his dignity ruffled but secure. The Judge—and Julian recalled this fact too late—had always preferred to hold himself a bit aloof from life and its chaotic minglings.

"You said this was a matter of vital importance. How does it concern the death of a scalawag—and the arrival of other scalawags to claim the remains?"

"If you'll follow me, sir, you'll find General Stedman waiting." They had reached the kitchen porch; the Cyclops of the local Den, wrapped in a wadded dressing gown, waited almost as petulantly in a Bath chair, with Louis Rothschild murmuring soothingly at his side.

"This way, gentlemen. It really isn't far."

The murmur of the approaching mob sounded like surf on the driveway as Julian opened the surgery door. Asa Sanderson (the swollen remains of what had once been a man) lay in an open pine-box coffin, draped in a sheet. At a nod from Louis the two visitors moved up to the foot of the coffin; Julian breathed deep and flung the sheet aside.

"Forgive me if I expose a convalescent to this ordeal, General. But it's quite necessary."

But it was Judge Bowen who spoke first; the general seemed too thunderstruck to find his voice. "That would be—Asa Sanderson?"

"As you observed, his brother's coming now to collect the body. He claims that Asa was murdered by the Klan."

"He lies in his teeth, sir."

"I'd give a great deal to be sure of that."

"Do you doubt my authority, Julian?"

"Not for a moment—while you're actually in command. But I've ridden on several missions now. Each evening when we disband I've noticed that a dozen horsemen leave us in a unit—still robed and still armed. Can you say you control *their* activities until dawn? Can you even name them?"

The general spoke at last. "Cover that ghastly thing, Julian. You've made your point."

Julian dropped the pine-box lid and turned toward the surgery window; the rumble of the cortege was nearer now. Reviewing his placement of Lafe's troop and the extra rifles beside each man, he prayed there would be no violence. Somehow he felt sure that Hume Sanderson would save himself for the oratory to come.

"We've been accused of a fearful crime, gentlemen. What action do we take?"

"The Klan is an invisible empire, Julian," said General Stedman

sternly. "We are beyond the law—and above it. Our membership is secret, as you must realize."

"It seems an open secret in Wilmington. Do you doubt that Sanderson will name us, to the last man, when he begins stumping for election?"

"He wouldn't dare!" Judge Bowen had all but roared the words; he flushed deeply now under Julian's accusing eyes.

"Does that mean he's next on the list if he goes too far?"

"Believe me, I know nothing whatever of this—this atrocity."

"Nor do I, Julian," said Stedman.

"I still insist that action be taken if I'm to run for that Senate seat."

"What do you suggest?"

"A full meeting of the Den at the earliest moment. Both of you know the hotheads—and their methods. Warn them individually, if need be. But I want it understood in open meeting that the Klan's purpose is to put down violence—not to create more. Above all, not to stifle free speech—even among our enemies."

"Then you do believe that the Klan was behind this mutilation?"

"I think we can all agree on that without more argument. I think we can live it down if we stop this kind of terror at its source."

"So we're to stand by and let Hume Sanderson do his worst?"

"Precisely."

"Men like Sanderson should never hold office."

"Granted. But we must defeat him fairly. Stand by on election day, if you insist—in full regalia. Stop ballot stuffing where you can —and scare the rascals away from the polls. But let this scalawag speak his mind—or I refuse to run against him."

Silence clamped down on the surgery. Outside, the shuffle of approaching feet had risen to an ominous crescendo, mixed with a low wailing of many voices. "If this were my land, Julian——" said the Judge. He struck fist to palm and faced away from the coffin. "Very well. We'll do as you say. May I speak for you, General?"

"You may indeed," said Stedman. "Not that we won't have the devil's own time convincing Randolph."

"You can make my uncle listen if you will," said Julian. "For the present, may I suggest that we make ourselves scarce? This is Sanderson's moment; I wouldn't spoil it for the world."

"Suppose these wretches start plundering?"

"Lafe will handle details. I've forty rifles posted around the estate —and no one in that crowd is armed. We saw to that at the gate."

Later, when he stood between the two men at the back window of his drawing room, he found that he could take no pleasure in his victory. He would have given a great deal for the privilege of meeting Hume Sanderson face to face and trading punches there on the threshold of the clinic. Eight Negroes, splendid in ceremonial black (and not quite drunk enough to stagger), bore the coffin out. Sanderson had already fallen to his knees, to split the heavens with his wailing—a cue for the whole cortege to break into a hysterical orgy of sobbing, no less real in spite of the fact that it was obviously rehearsed.

The black-draped wagon received its burden; the tatterdemalion procession (composed, for the most part, of red-necks from the Bend) waited respectfully while other mourners raised Hume Sanderson from the earth and helped him to stumble into line behind his brother's coffin. Then, chanting a whisky-bright hymn, the funeral train moved briskly down the drive. On the long journey to Wilmington they would pause to chant that hymn at every planter's gate. The ceremony had already been well advertised. A famous divine would read the eulogy from the church steps. The governor himself had promised to be present at the graveside.

Judge Bowen spoke dryly. "Still holding us to that promise, Julian?"

"I'm afraid so, gentlemen. And I won't detain you longer."

They drank a stirrup cup in the hallway as an early winter dusk closed on the land. Watching the two aging pillars of integrity vanish in the twilight, Julian knew that they would go straight to Clayton Randolph. At the moment he would have given a great deal to detain them—the house had never seemed lonelier. Hoyt was in Raleigh today for an important bit of palm-greasing. Louis had just been called across the river to attend a fever case; even Macalastair was upriver on a well-earned holiday. . . . Three quick drinks was the formula for loneliness tonight. Tomorrow would be time enough to think out his first speech in his political war.

He tossed the bourbon down quickly, standing alone before his own hearth fire. Harrison Chisholm's portrait stared down from the wall, but Julian avoided the questions in those eyes. His father, he re-

flected, had been luckier than he. Born into a world where right and wrong were crystal-clear, he had died when that world was still whole, still gloriously certain of its destiny.

Harrison Chisholm would not have found it necessary to remind two Southern gentlemen (born like himself to a creed of *noblesse oblige*) that all men are equal before the law. His father had never stood alone in a haunted room, drinking to put aside his loneliness —knowing that a fourth drink would break the last barrier and send him galloping to Wilmington and a more potent oblivion.

Julian was riding through the outskirts of town before he recalled that this was one of Lucy's masquerade nights at Marshall Hall. An invitation to the affair had reposed on his desk—unanswered—for several days. Not that it mattered. Lucy had received him before, regardless of guests. She would receive him tonight—of that he had not the slightest doubt. If there was a delay—well, he could afford to wait, with a bottle, until the last reveler had departed.

The chill of the December evening and the brisk ride had sent the whisky buzzing in his brain. But he was sober enough to avoid her driveway when he saw the light-spill behind the portieres of her downstairs windows and realized that the revel (there was no other name for Lucy's *soirées de gala*) was in full progress. Instead he rode sedately to the alley behind the Hanover House and stabled his mount in the hotel livery; then, keeping his hatbrim low, he proceeded to the side gate of Marshall Hall.

Lucy had given him a key to that hidden door in her garden wall; he knew that the lock would turn without a sound, that the trellis in the kitchen garden would mask his entry. From this point he had merely to enter the house itself by the buttery, mount to her bedroom, and summon her maid. If the coffee-colored wench was sober enough to take orders, Lucy would be at his side in a moment. . . .

Waltz music swirled through the upstairs hall, mingled with the whisper of dancing feet. He heard a howl of laughter from the stair well and leaned over the balustrade to check its source. A disheveled Columbine (whose profession was as obvious as her charms) had just whirled through the half-open doors that gave on to the ballroom, in the grip of a masked domino; the lady's laughter died as the couple paused to kiss under the full glow of the chandeliers. For an instant Columbine seemed to melt in the circle of the domino's embrace.

Then she broke from her partner's arms, stepped out of her costume with one shrug of those opulent shoulders, and scuttled for the haven of the clothespress beneath the stairs. Domino stripped off his costume and followed—a bit more circumspect in navy smallclothes.

Within the ballroom violins and drum rose to a strong crescendo. It was a prelude to the grand march that always swept the majority of Lucy's guests into some kind of order before they filed in to supper.

Julian's eyes were still on the domino—sprawled under the glow of the chandelier like a forgotten reveler. Ignoring the amorous cooing within the clothespress, he came downstairs on the run, snatched up the disguise, and dived for the protection of the half-open ballroom door. The domino, he found, was a fair fit. The mask that swung from the ruffled collar covered his face from forehead to lips. Now, at least, he could stalk Lucy with no chance of detection.

Crossing the hall again, he could afford to reel a little, since most of the guests would be even drunker than he. He paused on the threshold of the ballroom while wisdom fought a losing battle with desire. Then he squared his shoulders and opened his lips to a full-throated bellow that matched the cries within.

viii

Pierrot and Pierrette capered here in shameless embrace along with Harlequin and Columbine. Satyrs leered through goat masks at all-too-complaisant goddesses—or howled in pursuit of shepherdess and slave girl. All, even the most flagrant, were masked. Even the most drunken seemed to treasure this frail protection quite as much as they enjoyed their partners.

He found Lucy at once. No mask could hide that lithe body. She was dressed as Cleopatra tonight. Appropriately enough, she was dancing with a Roman emperor who kept his footing with an effort. It was simple enough to detach this ponderous partner, to claim her for his own.

Cleopatra whirled into Domino's arms without missing a beat of the frenetic drums. The tom-tom hammered through his brain as her mouth sought his under the mask.

"Welcome, darling. I wondered when you'd come."

"Can you leave your guests awhile?"

Her hand closed on his, pressing a key into the palm. "The door's locked, Julian. I've been saving that room——"

"You think of everything, don't you?"

"Go up and wait for me. And lock the door behind you. I'll let myself in—with another key. Just give me five minutes to dance with the commanding general. After all, that's protocol." Her laughter died as they kissed again. Then she left his arms, to writhe across the room in an excellent burlesque of the Serpent of the Nile, to fling herself into the arms of a rotund Arab sheik.

The empty silence within Lucy's bedroom was soothing, but only for a moment. Even here her wraith lurked triumphant—in the grinning faces of the statuettes in the corners, in the ghost of her perfume that hung in the air, a witch's spell that could steal reason away.

Only a small night light burned beside the bed; in that goblin glow the green tent above seemed translucent, a warm undersea grotto, swirling with secret delight. He sank in the chaise longue that stood against the far wall, letting his desire master him, until he seemed part of that same silence, willing to wait forever.

Once again the odd sense of dreaming crept over his spirit. He was not sure if he were sleeping when he heard the lock turning, though even now he realized that Lucy had not had time to come upstairs. . . . Yes, it was the balcony door that had swung gently open to admit a figure wrapped bandit-fashion in a dark cloak, with hat and boots to match.

Secure in the shadow of the chaise longue, he watched the intruder cross the room in three purposeful strides, saw a gloved hand spring the lock on Lucy's desk. Papers spilled in a flood of white as the same gloved hand brought the night lamp closer; the busy fingers discarded some of the desk's contents and thrust other papers into the depths of the cloak. Inertia still held him in its soundless grip. He was not quite sure if this was reality or a waking dream—and far too fuddled to betray his presence—when the hall door clicked and Lucy herself whisked into the room.

Careless of the shouts that pursued her from the hall, Lucy leaned back against the door for an instant to let the lamplight outline her

charms—more revealed than hidden by her diaphanous gown. He knew she was preening herself for his eyes alone and unaware of the visitor, who had plunged from sight as the door swung wide. He opened his mouth to shout a warning and produced no more than a grotesque, rasping sound. In that moment the intruder leaped across the bed and struck Lucy, panther-wise, to send her reeling under the sheer surprise of the impact. The cloak was gone now, and the attacker's coppery hair streamed wild about her shoulders. Inertia still held him in its grip as he realized that this was Jane—that his wife and his mistress were locked in a tooth-and-claw death grip between bed and window.

"You trollop! Why'd you come upstairs *now*?"

It was his wife's voice, with something primitive added—an elemental, all-woman hatred that seemed to tear at Lucy's flesh no less remorselessly than Jane's nails were tearing that translucent gown from Lucy's back. But Lucy had wrenched free, even as the words emerged from their melee on the carpet. Rising to one knee and raking in turn with her ten arched fingers, she ripped Jane's shirt down to the circle of her belt.

For a moment the two women stood panting on the scuffed carpet, with half the room between them. Jane's voice was cold enough when she spoke again—as controlled as the derringer in her fist and the muzzle pointed between Lucy's eyes.

"I'd kill you if you were worth killing, Lucy Sprague—but I've found what I wanted."

Lucy's voice was just as cold now that she had regained her breath; if she was aware of the pistol in Jane's hand, she gave no sign. "You won't get out of here alive."

"I'll manage, thank you."

"What if I scream?"

"Try. It'll be the last sound you'll make on earth."

"What did you want here?"

"The proof that you're—what you are."

So far the women's voices had been pitched in whispers. Holding his ground in the shadowed corner, Julian felt they were both unaware of his presence.

"You'll never drive me out," said Lucy. "Spy all you like, I'm here to stay. Ask your husband, if you don't believe me."

"This doesn't concern Julian," said Jane in that same icy whisper. "It doesn't even concern us—as people. It's your kind, and your plans for tomorrow——"

She dropped the pistol and stepped calmly forward. Her fist swung in a long, sure arc, as precisely as any boxer's. Julian heard the crack of knuckles on bone, saw Lucy's eyes go glassy in the lamplight, saw her stagger and fall, face down, on the twisted carpet. He rose at last as Jane knotted a fist in Lucy's hair, lifted her from the floor, and sent her limp body sprawling across the bed.

"That's her last man hunt for quite a while," said Jane, and her voice, even now, was the calmest of whispers. "When she comes out of her faint, that left eye will be purple as an eggplant." She looked thoughtfully at Julian, then back at her unconscious rival.

"How on earth did you——" He swallowed hard as he realized the inadequacy of words.

"Don't ask questions, Julian. Questions won't save me now."

"Did you know I was here?"

"Not when I came in from the balcony. Only when she entered from the hall."

"You know why, I suppose?"

"I've known all about you. There isn't time to blame you now. Amos is waiting at the Hanover House stable—and Brooke is watching that window. How can I leave here alive?"

"Jason Brooke? He doesn't work for Lucy now."

"He doesn't seem to work for Lucy. That's part of her cleverness." Again Jane's fist knotted in Lucy's hair; she turned the other woman's face toward the night light, studying the puff of angry flesh around Lucy's eye with something close to triumph. "He's watched this house for months from the outside. Just in case we decided to pay his mistress a visit."

"But why should you, of all people——"

"You've no right to ask questions now."

Forgetting everything but the adamant wall that stood between them, he flung himself forward, determined to breach the barrier. "By God, Jane, you'll answer that!"

"I'll tell you this much. The woman's a criminal twenty times over. As great a criminal as the Klan itself."

"What do you know of the Klan?"

"I've said enough. When it's time, the proof goes back to Washington. *Her* crimes—along with the others."

"Does Lucy know what you're doing?"

"Of course. That's why she pays Brooke to guard her. She's promised him a thousand dollars for proof of my death. Certain Klansmen would pay even more——" She broke off abruptly; her breasts lifted in the glow of the night light as she fought down the desire to say more. He stood quietly in his corner, aching to take her in his arms, and reminding himself that such a move would be fatal.

"Is that all you have to tell me?" he demanded at last.

"Quite all, my dear. And don't think I blame you too much for—what I found here tonight. After the way I've treated you——" Again she breathed deep, and her eyes dropped for the first time.

"I blame myself, Jane. And tonight was the end of *this*. I promise you that much."

"I've no right to ask for promises," she said. "No matter what you do, I'll go on loving you—to the end." She glanced contemptuously at Lucy as she spoke, and just escaped smiling. "The end may be tonight if I don't leave this house promptly."

"That won't be easy if Brooke's in the garden."

Jane turned to the window. "I slipped in without being seen. I'll get out—somehow."

"You said he was watching that window."

"Look through the portieres. He may have gone to the other side of the house."

Julian peered cautiously through the chink in the curtains and cursed softly at what he saw. The moon had just risen above the rooftree of the Hanover House, bathing the gardens of Marshall Hall in merciless light. An unwanted visitor would be observed instantly on that wide-open lawn long before he could reach the shadow of the fence. No matter where Jason Brooke was stationed (and Julian was sure the Englishman was watching from some vantage point), he would have a clear-cut target now.

"You can't go as you came—that's clear."

"Is there a side door?"

"And a side gate. It's always locked; he'd hardly be watching there."

"How can we go that way if it's closed?"

"I have the key." He flushed deeply, realizing just what the ad-

mission implied. Lucy moaned from the bed and stirred vaguely as she attempted to lift herself. Julian stayed clear as Jane leaped like an aroused panther, lifted her rival's head, and struck Lucy hard, just behind the ear, using the derringer butt as a club. Lucy collapsed on her counterpane with a sigh and did not stir again.

"Don't look so startled," said his wife. "Amos taught me to do that long ago—and to hit just hard enough. She'll be herself again in a half-hour—worse luck."

"A half-hour should do nicely—if I can get you clear."

"Then you *will* help me?"

"How can you ask?" he cried, not caring if his voice carried to the hall beyond. Jane was already in his arms. It no longer seemed grotesque that he should comfort her here in this siren's tent, with Lucy tumbled like a sack on the bed.

"Say you forgive me," he whispered. "That's all I dare to ask you now."

"There's nothing to forgive any more—is there, Julian?"

"She's behind me—now and forever."

"*Then take me out of here!*" He felt her shrink within his embrace, as though she yearned to lose herself in his nearness—to forget what awaited her outside.

He considered briefly. "You can't go through the hall without being seen."

Jane picked up her cloak and her slouch hat and donned both with a flourish. "This is a masked ball. Couldn't I pass as a smuggler?"

It was his turn to glance at Lucy as he covered her with a quilt. "Lucy came up that stairway in a costume—of sorts."

Jane shrugged and tossed the cloak aside. For a moment she studied herself at the tall wall mirror, as coolly as though she were accustomed to wear nothing but doeskin riding breeches and jack boots.

"Would this help? I might pass as a lady pirate."

"If you think I'd permit you outside in *that!*"

She was smiling in earnest now; the white-and-gold silhouette in the mirror echoed her laughter. "It's well past midnight, Julian. I'm told that's a trifle late for modesty—at Marshall Hall. Especially when its hostess gives a *bal masqué.*"

"Cover yourself, please!" He was almost shouting now. "Give me time to think."

"Surely Lucy had more than one costume." Jane was already at the armoire, tearing ball gowns from the hooks. "It's sinful for one woman to own so many clothes—and all from Paris, too. It's only fair that I borrow one——"

"Everyone knows that this is her bedroom," he said with sudden inspiration. "If you're seen coming out, you *must* look like Lucy."

"I'll try anything to get clear," said Jane coolly. "Even that."

"The whole house knows she's upstairs with a man—a man in a black domino." He stepped to the mirror in turn, studying his masquerade carefully. "No one will recognize *me*, I'm sure. Here—put on that pink velvet—the one with the sequin bodice."

"Pink isn't my color."

"Put it on, I say! Stop arguing! We'll cover your hair with a shawl; here's an extra mask you can use."

Jane shrugged and let the ball gown drop over her shoulders. Thanks to the bountiful train, the garment covered her completely, save for the daring décolletage. She studied the effect in the mirror and twisted her copper-red hair into a high knot.

"I look ridiculous, and you know it."

"You look lovely," he said, and the breath caught in his throat as he spoke.

"Pink with this carrot top? Not a woman downstairs will believe me."

"Believe me, they'll be too drunk to notice. Here—tie up your head in this shawl. I'm going to carry you downstairs and abduct you. They'll think it's Lucy, bound for an adventure outside. I've seen her leave her own parties more than once—with Hudnall and others. Who'd try to stop her tonight?"

Jane knotted the heavy white silk shawl about her head and fitted the mask. She studied the effect critically in the mirror.

"You're right. I *could* pass for her now."

"Does that mean you'll risk it?"

"If you will, Julian. How far will you—abduct me?"

"First to a carriage. There's always a swarm of buggies outside on Lucy's party nights. Then to the stable of the Hanover House."

"Shouldn't I take a cloak? I think I've earned more than just a dress that doesn't suit me."

"You should, of course—if you were sober. It's known downstairs that Lucy was drunk. Would she let a strange domino carry her outdoors if she were sober?"

"You think of everything, Julian. I could use you in my work." Jane stood above the bed and stared down at the collapsed body. "What shall we do with my—my late adversary?"

"We can hardly leave her here—that bed will be occupied in another moment, or I don't know this party." He moved quickly to lift the quilt-draped figure in his arms. "That's her dressing-room door—to the right, beyond the armoire. If you'll hold it open, I'll make her as comfortable as I can."

Lucy's dressing room, as he knew well, was heated for its owner's comfort and fitted with a day bed for her more intimate conferences. He placed her on this temporary resting place as casually as he would have moved a patient in his own clinic—and paused only long enough to test her pulse. It was steady enough; the eye, as Jane had predicted, was beginning to turn a rich greenish purple, and the bump that Jane had raised behind the ear had swollen to the proportions of a smallish egg. But there was no sign of concussion and no bleeding; Lucy would live down both wounds with time.

"Suppose someone finds her?"

"There's a spring catch; she keeps her surplus cash in that boudoir."

Neither of them spoke as he slammed the dressing-room door behind him and made sure the lock had snapped. Someone roared with laughter outside, and the fist of a passing reveler banged on the panel of the hall door. The whole party saw its hostess go into her bedroom, he thought wildly. Everyone thinks that she's deep in dalliance now with a gentleman in a domino. We've picked our moment perfectly.

"Ready, Jane?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"Take this key in your hand, then. You can open the hall door as I carry you over."

He lifted her in his arms, glanced one more time at the mirror to make sure the masquerade was authentic to the last detail. Then he walked boldly to the hall door—as boldly as though he were indeed a drunken masquerader about to carry his mistress into the night.

Jane turned the key in the lock so smoothly that he had no need to

break his stride. They burst into the hall with a whoop of laughter, just avoiding an embracing couple on the top flight of the stairway. Below, the hallway swirled with colored lights as a brace of footmen rotated a transparency before a massed bank of candles that stood on the newel post. Too late, he realized that they had blundered into a special entertainment—that the wide circle of parquet where steps and hallway joined was now a stage of sorts, with a hundred avid spectators banked around its circumference, stacked like pyramids in each doorway, packed along the stair treads.

He broke stride instinctively, sinking into a vacant corner of the stairway and pulling Jane into his lap with a whispered word. Fortunately their arrival had all but gone unnoticed; only the burnous-draped Hudnall (throned, like a master of revels, in the ballroom door) lifted an imperious hand for silence. Julian heard the throb of drums inside and the drunken moaning of the watchers before his eyes focused on the reason for their avid, wide-eyed attention around the rainbow-tinted circle.

"It's the *danse du ventre*," he whispered at Jane's ear. "We must watch it now."

"Can't we go by the back stairway?"

He lifted his eyes without answering. She followed his glance to the landing, which was now packed with watchers, with a still greater crowd standing behind. They had swarmed from every bedroom on the floor, he thought, when they heard those drums. If we'd waited another moment, we could have slipped out the back way unnoticed. It was too late for such an easy exit. If his suspicions of Jane were true (and he could hardly doubt them now), she had enemies on that stairway by the score.

Below, the drums rose to a frenzy. A slave girl leaped into the iridescent circle of lights, weaving her hips like a ballerina gone mad, drumming the floor with heels and fist as she bent low before Hudnall. Then, with bare feet planted firmly, with hips still gyrating, she began the ancient *danse du ventre*—a dance in which every muscle moved to slow music, though the performer's feet never really stirred.

An emerald set in the slave girl's navel gleamed like a cat's eye as it caught the weaving lights. With each gyration the drums increased their beat. Centering the dance on the sheik himself, tossing her last scruple aside with her last veil, the dancer wooed Hudnall with each

throbbing muscle. The commanding officer of the Wilmington area devoured her with his eyes, and roared his approval as she collapsed in a pair of waiting arms.

Julian felt his wife stir at his side and clamped a hard hand on her wrist.

"Wait!"

"We've got to join this orgy," she whispered. "Or pretend to. It's our only chance."

She was gone with the words, weaving into the dancing circle with an easy, swinging grace, lifting her rounded white arms in a classic dance pattern. Then she, too, began to dance for Hudnall alone, to woo him with body and flashing eyes. Watching from the stairway (and inching his way desperately down to floor level), Julian saw at once that there was something far more alluring in Jane's sinuous, fully clothed rhythm, a kind of clean contrast to the giggling strumpets that surrounded her.

He was hardly startled when Hudnall came rampaging to his feet at last and bumbled forward in a clumsy effort to seize Jane in his embrace. Drunk as he was, the commanding officer just escaped falling. The whole assembly broke into baying laughter when he gained his feet again and found that he was facing a snub-nosed derringer held easily in the dancer's palm.

"Wha's this, Lucy?" he roared.

"The *danse de pistole*," said Jane easily, and even Julian could believe for the moment that Lucy Sprague spoke from behind that strip of black gauze mask, so perfectly did Jane mimic the other's husky contralto.

"Four barrels—as you see. One for your toe——"

She fired as she spoke, blasting the parquet a scant inch from the sheik's booted foot.

"One for your head——" She fired again, missing the sheik's ear by inches, and sending a mirror flying in splinters.

"*And two for your black heart!*"

But Hudnall had pancaked on the floor long since, with his head buried in the sleeves of his robe; onlookers and dancers alike had scampered to safety with goatlike haste, braying their fear as they vanished. The drums throbbed on within the ballroom as Jane stood serene in the rainbow light of the transparency, the pistol fanned

down at her hip, her eyes still flashing. Julian came forward to take her free hand.

"And now, my friend," she cried in a voice that all could hear. "Will you take me where I belong?"

He lifted her high with the travesty of a drunken laugh that matched her own; he pressed a cheek deep in the décolletage of her gown as she lay cradled in his arms, then lifted his head to stare defiantly at each empty doorframe, as though daring the Army and all its hirelings to rob him of his prize.

In the frame of the entrance door a reveler careening out of the night just missed colliding with their unhurried exit; Julian's toe lifted him neatly, to send him sprawling across the sill. A staff sergeant, his mustache points beaded with frost, stared hard at them as Julian pretended to reel down the steps. From the corner of one eye he saw that the sergeant was in charge of an army buggy (with the general's own star on the dashboard) that waited just beside the carriage block. He stared back at the Yankee non-com, forcing the man into a fair substitute for a salute. Then he reeled on into the comparative safety of the waiting hacks.

Thank heaven for that wilderness of wheels, he thought. For the steaming horseflesh that stand between us now and Brooke's sharp eyes there in the shadowed garden. He had gambled on this protection, knowing that every cabdriver in Wilmington usually waited at Lucy's door in the small hours to transport half-conscious officers to their quarters.

A capable black hand seized his elbow, steadying him toward the safe depths of a hackney coach. He lifted Jane to the seat in a final burst of bravado, scorning the coachman's aid as he slapped a gold coin into the Negro's hand.

"Straight down Market Street. I'll direct you later." He forced another drunken laugh as he spoke—for the benefit of the watchers who had begun to throng cautiously on Lucy's portico. Hudnall's sergeant could collar me even now, he thought, if he guessed that I'm abducting anyone but my hostess.

"Come, love! We're late now."

It was Jane's voice from the depths of the carriage, and the husky contralto tone mimicked Lucy to perfection. So did the bare white arms that stretched out to encircle his neck, the avid mouth that sought his in the glare of a dozen carriage lamps.

"Kiss me as though you meant it," she whispered. "The whole wolf pack is watching."

He kissed her then as though he could never be done with kissing, hearing the cheers from the portico as a man might hear thunder in a waking dream. With their mouths still joined he moved into the coach beside her and slammed the door. There was no time for words as they careened into the blessed darkness of Market Street; he knew that he must act the masquerade to the end.

"Douse those lamps, coachman! You know that Mrs. Sprague prefers the dark!"

The coach roared through the esplanade, canting perilously as it turned toward the alley that opened, in turn, to the stables of the Hanover House. Amos exploded from that dark tunnel almost before they could skid to a halt just beyond—there was no other word to describe the mountain man's roaring gallop into the pre-dawn hush of Market Street. As always, he seemed one with the horse, a gaunt figure bent low above the animal's streaming mane. Jane's own mount galloped beside him, his muzzle all but touching Amos's knee—a well-trained companion on many forays such as these.

"Get what you wanted, ma'am?" Had he greeted Jane on the portico of Chisholm Hundred, the mountain man could not have been calmer.

"All that I wanted, and more, Amos."

"Then we better move fast. Haven't more'n an hour to daylight."

Julian felt the quick, warm pressure of his wife's hand. She was astride her horse in one easy leap, careless of the flaring skirts of Lucy's best ball gown. Amos had already tossed her a coat from his saddlebag. She buttoned the homespun garment to her chin, covering the ivory gleam of shoulders, the moonstruck gleam of sequins.

"Good-by, Julian. And thanks again for saving me."

You saved yourself tonight, he thought dully. You'll go on saving yourself till the end of time.

"My horse is in the stable, Jane. I'm coming with you."

"Won't do, Doc," said Amos. "We've too far to go, come morning."

"Keep out of this, Amos! I'm talking to my wife."

Jane loomed above him in the moonlight—tall as a young viking and quite as sure of her destiny. He waited hopefully while she tossed

Lucy's scarf aside with a disdainful gesture, letting her hair stream free.

"Give me a little more time, my dear," she said. "Then I *will* come home—and take orders from you forever."

"Take an order now. Wait till I can saddle up. I'm riding with you."

"You know that's impossible, Julian."

"You'll wait if you love me."

"I'm going because I love you," she said, and held out her hand. "And I don't reproach you for tonight, darling. I don't reproach you for anything. If I live, you'll understand why."

He kissed her hand, holding it against his lips awhile, letting Amos curse on unheeded. When he released her at last, she seemed to vanish in a single spurt of hoofs, riding as easily as a man, holding her mount firm with the hard compulsion of her knees, disdaining the reins as she unlimbered a carbine from the saddle boot.

He took in these details hungrily there in the waning moonlight, knowing he must treasure them for a long time. Then he stumbled down the cobbled alley to the Hanover House stables. At the door he remembered to pause and strip off his domino—the last tie that bound him to Lucy Sprague.

ix

My dear Julian:

Knowing your Reasons too well, I will not reproach you for neglecting me lately. Nor will I remind you that a soiree at Marshall Hall cannot be the same without your Valued Presence.

To show how well I Value you, may I beg you to call on me at nine tonight? I shall be Alone—but do not let that detain you. Believe me, my own perfect Lover, I won't ask you to . . .

Lucy's pen had slithered as she wrote; he guessed that there had been brandy in her head when she penned that letter. Julian flung down the note and walked to his library window to stare out across his fields—pale green now in the new spring sunshine, burgeoning to the horizon's rim.

Since the night of that bizarre masquerade he had kept clear of Lucy Sprague; the clean winds of March had banished her febrile

allure as efficiently as any tonic. Why must this letter come today to torment him again? And why must the messenger wait on his driveway for an answer?

. . . to do what we once did so well together. At this moment I realize that the Pale Goddess of Purity is firmly in the ascendant . . .

Again the pen had slithered across the page, as though it betrayed an inner agitation. He knew that Lucy had been under fire lately from more than one quarter. Only a week ago her front windows had been smashed by a mob large enough to choke the Market Street esplanade and sullen enough to stand its ground until mounted cavalry dispersed it.

Since then he had glimpsed her twice in the Wilmington streets, queening it still in her carriage with officers beside her—and obviously tipsy, even in the full glare of day. Yet Lucy had never been deliberately yearning before. Even in her most abandoned moments she had retained a certain pride.

Those days are not behind us, Julian. Our Desire for one another will never be satisfied. It's a simple fact—as simple, in its way, as Hunger. Someday you will admit it completely. Then, and then only, we'll be Truly One. . . .

The pen strokes were firm now, as though Lucy's head had cleared at last after her first wild burst of longing. She had always wanted him; that much was evident. Was it possible that she loved him too —as completely as a woman like Lucy Sprague could love?

Believe me, my only Love, I call you to Wilmington tonight for your own Good—and not for mine. What I have to tell you concerns the welfare of that Madwoman you call Wife, even more than it concerns your future, and mine. . . . Send word you'll be prompt. I await you with Fearful News.

He paced his library rug one more time, remembering how cleverly she had tricked him before with that *cri du coeur*—to say nothing of that hint of doom impending. But he could not down the instinct that told him, just as surely, that there was a real threat behind her words—a menace he would never understand—if he ignored her summons. Lucy had been drunk when she wrote. She would be sober

enough when they faced one another in the house he had sworn never to enter again.

He rang for Roy, avoiding his major-domo's eyes as he spoke. Every Negro in the Cape Fear Valley knew that Lucy Sprague had been burned in effigy on the courthouse steps in Wilmington last night by persons unknown, now that the county had learned she was paymaster to the Klan.

"Mrs. Sprague's messenger is waiting at the carriage block. Say that it will give me pleasure to wait upon her tonight."

He watched the door sigh shut on Roy's silent disapproval. *Pleasure*, he thought, is the last word I should apply to Lucy now—she who was once a synonym for delight. . . . He remembered (and discounted) a story that had reached him via Louis's medical connections in Wilmington. The great Mrs. Sprague—so the gossip ran—was suffering from a consumption of the lungs, a direct result of her excesses. Naturally, she drank to drown her fears. It was even said that a certain Paris doctor who had cured more than one royal patient of the same dread disease had been imported to treat Mrs. Sprague in private.

But this, of course, was only hearsay. The Lucy Sprague who had outlived smallpox in Paris and survived yellow jack in Nassau would hardly contract tuberculosis in Wilmington. That particular gossip had probably been inspired by her latest lover—a black bull of a Frenchman, here ostensibly to buy cotton for the third Napoleon, and staying (like all visiting celebrities) in a suite at Marshall Hall. . . . Julian sighed and plunged into the mass of work on his desk.

Twilight was heavy in the drawing room when he emerged at last. Hoyt Marshall, slumped in a chair beside a wide-open french door, dozed in the treacherous spring air that swept up from the river. He stirred and yawned cavernously as he fixed the master of Chisholm Hundred with a weary eye.

"I hear you go in to town this evening."

"I'm afraid I must, Hoyt—or disappoint a lady."

"Mrs. Sprague invited me to sup with her later," said Hoyt. "Let's hope our appointments don't conflict."

"No danger of that, my friend."

Hoyt was still observing him with narrow eyes, and Julian flushed under the scrutiny. It was common knowledge that the lawyer had been Lucy's most frequent visitor in the three months since that

notorious masked ball. Julian knew that Hoyt's loyalty was unquestioned—even when he heard his friend's horse in the driveway just before dawn and understood too well why Hoyt's step was unsteady on the stair outside his door. At the same time, he could not help wondering where the long debauch would end.

"No danger at all—tonight," said Hoyt. "I declined the lady's proffer with thanks. So should you, Julian. We've a meeting at the Den—and I gather it's important."

"I stopped attending those meetings long since. You know why."

"I think you should come tonight. Remember, no one resigns from the Klan—not even when it's baying for his wife's blood."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not quite sure—yet. But you know that Jane is the Klan's first quarry. Ever since the Report was issued."

"Need you remind me?"

"You're a member in good standing, Julian—even if you've been inactive these past months. You owe it to Jane to attend tonight's meeting. If only to learn what's in their minds."

"You've told me that."

"Don't forget your uncle is Cyclops now." Hoyt's scowl vanished in his quiet laughter. "I'm told he just escaped apoplexy when the Report came into his hands."

Julian found that he was smiling, too, despite the fears that his friend's words had aroused. The document to which Hoyt referred needed no definition in the South—especially among members of the Klan.

Published over the protests of the agents who had compiled it, the Report was a frank statement of conditions under Reconstruction. Prepared state by state, and complete with chapter and verse, it centered its indictment on the activities of the Ku-Klux Klan and proved, with a precise listing of provable atrocities, that the influence of the Invisible Empire (in the beginning, a force for good) was only a growing evil today. Above all, the Report showed (in many cases with an actual list of members) that the organization was now largely under the control of hotheads of every stripe, who used the Klan's robe as a convenient means to wreak personal vengeance—on personal enemies, who were anything but enemies of the South.

Copies of the Report on North Carolina (prepared, like the others,

at the order of General Grant himself, already ticketed as the country's next President) had already been scanned by every prominent citizen in the Wilmington area, including certain prominent Klansmen, who still refused to believe the evidence of their eyes. Some of these men had protested their innocence in private, remembering, too late, that the Klan was a secret order, that they had not been granted the right to withdraw. Their protests had had a hollow sound even in their own ears. Jane's report (and Jane Chisholm's name was written into every line, though the document itself was unsigned) had shocked more than one honest night rider to admit openly what he had long feared in secret—namely, that violence was a dangerous cure for violence, that a white hood was a too ready disguise for all forms of evil.

So far the Report itself was only a preliminary; it was an accepted fact all over the county that a countervigilante band, captained by a woman who rode as fearlessly as any man, was scouring the back country for more evidence—until it would be possible to outlaw the whole Klan movement, both by public opinion and by force of arms. Hudnall had already left his army command under a cloud; his successor, a Tennessee general with the interests of the South at heart, was house cleaning now at Wilmington barracks. Replacing venal officers and non-coms with men of proven worth, he was preparing to launch a military occupation that would be both efficient and just—and capable of preserving order in the entire area.

In the meantime, the Klan still flourished—riding the midnight trails as fearlessly as ever, enforcing its will on scalawag and honest opponent alike. Hoyt had not exaggerated when he said that the first objective of the local Den was the woman who had exposed the rascals in its ranks—the woman the whole county now knew as Jane Chisholm, though no one but Hoyt had dared to name her to Julian's face.

Tonight there was honest concern in the lawyer's voice as Julian turned away and picked up his riding gloves from the mantel.

"We've had rumors that Jane and Amos are working close to Wilmington again."

"We, Hoyt?"

"I go to Den meetings, if you don't. I keep my ears open—and my mouth shut."

"I've heard those rumors before. I've even heard it said that Jane was returning to Chisholm Hundred."

"She wouldn't do that——"

"I realize she wouldn't. She's staying clear, for my sake."

"She'll continue to stay clear until this business is settled." Hoyt's face darkened. "Until the Klan goes—or until it triumphs."

"With an efficient commanding officer in Wilmington—and enough troops to patrol the roads—the Klan can disband with a clear conscience."

"And give the land to the white trash and their Negro friends?"

"Sanderson won the election," said Julian mildly. "Much as I hate the fellow personally, he's state senator now—for our district. If he makes a success of communal farming at Catfish Bend, who am I to sneer?"

"Look at the facts squarely, Julian. If the Negro as a class, or the poor white—or both—seizes power in the South, it means a revolution, the like of which this country has never seen. We can live down the shame of losing a war. We'll never survive the shame of accepting a Negro or a red-neck as an equal."

"So the Klan's our only hope?"

"Someone must keep the rabble in line until we recover political power."

"I'm beginning to see why I was asked to run for office."

Hoyt shrugged. "And I'm beginning to see why you withdrew your name."

"I offered to make a bargain with Stedman and the Judge. To say nothing of my esteemed uncle. They agreed to give Sanderson the right to say what he liked—without interference. When they broke their word—when they raided meeting after meeting——" Julian shrugged in turn. "What else could I do but withdraw?"

"You're the one man who could have kept that rascal out of Raleigh."

"I won't say I'm glad he won—I agree with you that he's a rascal to his marrow. But I couldn't make the election a class issue—with most of the guns on my side. I wanted to fight him man to man."

"Since when does a peasant like Sanderson earn the title of man? Since when has the South been a democracy? Of course it's a class war. That's just what he's preaching from the other side of the fence. Why,

he's already introduced a bill at Raleigh making it illegal for any one family to own more than a hundred acres——"

"It's his privilege."

"As of now. And assuming he lives to see it through."

Julian drew on his gloves. "I've heard enough, Hoyt. And I'll keep clear of Klan meetings in the future—unless you can tell me where I'll find Jane. I'd give the world to send her away for a while."

"This time the rumor has it that she's established her bushwhackers on Gator Island," said Hoyt calmly. "I've even heard that your uncle is calling in reinforcements from across the county line to raid the island in force. Of course I don't believe it—yet."

"It's more than even Amos Martin would dare. Why, Gator Island is less than a mile from Den headquarters."

"Jane might be aware of that," said Hoyt thoughtfully. "After all, she and Amos are highly legal—as of now. They've every right to camp out where they like—and see what happens next."

"Are you implying that she's inviting an attack?"

"I'm suggesting you come to the Den tonight and see for yourself."

"Thank you, no. I've an appointment with Lucy and I'm late now."

Pushing his horse into a hard gallop on the turnpike, he still remembered the puzzled look in Hoyt Marshall's eyes. He could hardly blame the lawyer for the impression he had left behind. Hoyt must think I've succumbed to Lucy entirely, he thought. But there had been no time to explain his conviction that Lucy, more than anyone, could supply the key to Jane's activities—to say nothing of the plans of the local Den and its fire-breathing Cyclops, Clayton Randolph. . . .

Like most fat cats of the district, his uncle had been staggered by Jane's report—and louder than all others in his cries for vengeance. Lucy, however, had preserved a strange silence throughout. Implicated with General Hudnall in more than one land deal, threatened with a dozen lawsuits when her contributions to the Klan were made public, she had handed the threats to her lawyers, tripled her bribes in Washington, and plunged forthwith into a life of pleasure until the storm abated. But it was said freely in Wilmington that she had doubled her bribe for proof of Jane Chisholm's death. It was even whispered that she had promised to pry the last of Randolph's creditors from his back if he would bring Jane's scalp to Marshall Hall.

Julian struck his pocket with a free fist as he roared on toward Wilmington—and heard Lucy's note crackle under the impact. If that note meant anything (and Lucy never attacked without reason), it was a warning for Jane—a veiled admission that Lucy had some special knowledge of peril impending.

And yet why should Lucy pay for Jane's death at one moment and warn Jane's husband the next?

Dogwood was bursting into bloom along the turnpike; the fallow fields had never seemed more tranquil. Why should he feel that a trap was closing on him tonight—a snare with no real exit?

X

Marshall Hall again, tall as ever in the quiet night, its broken panes repaired, its Doric columns an inviolate barrier between its owner and the common herd—though Julian noted that a provost guard was strolling quietly down the sidewalk and back again to make sure that same herd did not overstep the mark. The great brass knocker sounded its summons within; the major-domo, inscrutable as a sphinx, bowed him down the hall that had echoed to carnal laughter not too long ago—though it was quiet as a museum tonight, with a museum's same spent repose.

"Mrs. Sprague will receive you in the loggia, Doctor."

He walked a little deeper in the trap, hearing yet another door sigh shut behind him. Lucy half sat, half reclined in a deep wicker chair on the loggia, staring at the plash of a fountain in the boxwood garden, framed in the low arch that opened here from house to lawn. She was all in black tonight—a rich, rustling taffeta with puffed sleeves, the neckline demurely square. A golden bracelet (twined in lovelocks and joined with a square-cut emerald clasp) was her only ornament. The effect, he noted wryly, was entirely virginal, including the downcast eyes, the hand she offered him in greeting.

"Sit down, Julian. I'll try to be brief."

He bowed from a safe distance, ignoring the proffered hand. Lucy leaned back with her composure unruffled. "So we can't even be friends any more?"

"This isn't a friendly visit."

"Then why did you come?"

"You mentioned news of Jane. You said it was important news. I'm waiting."

"I won't say a word if you take that tone. It's unendurable, after what we've meant to one another."

"I think it's a bit late for fencing, Lucy. If you've anything to tell me, tell me now. Otherwise I'll wish you a good evening—and consider this the end of our acquaintance."

"So that's my reward when I try to help you—and your wife?"

Her tone was warm with a righteous anger. Strain as he might, he could see no flaw in her poise. A stranger, seeing her for the first time, would have sworn she was fresh from some cloister, ready for her first shy sortie into the world, and fearful of the outcome.

"Why should you wish to help Jane?" Despite his good resolve, he moved closer—a bit disappointed when he saw that the black eye Jane had inflicted had long since healed.

"Because I'm a jealous woman," said Lucy. "And jealous women, as a philosopher once remarked, are always a little mad."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow."

"I've hated that wife of yours for a long time, Julian. I've even tried to—destroy her——"

"So I heard," he said dryly.

Lucy dropped her eyes. "You heard a great deal more than the truth, I suppose. You probably think me a monster."

He held his ground, watching her carefully. You must know I was in the room the night Jane beat you unconscious, he thought swiftly. You must realize that I understand, all too well, why she visited Marshall Hall that night. Aloud, he said only, "I'll reserve judgment, Lucy—until you prove you deserve the title."

"Tell me this: are they saying that I offered a bribe for proof of—of Jane's death?"

"All that and more."

"And you believed them?"

"We're quite alone," he said. "You can be frank, for once. Is Jason Brooke your paid assassin?"

"He was my bodyguard once," said Lucy wearily. "My bodyguard and my confidential secretary. Until I dismissed him for—impertinence."

"But he's still your paid assassin."

"That's standard gossip. I've heard it a hundred times——"

"Why does he stand at your gate each night?"

"Market Street is a public thoroughfare. I can't control the passers-by if they choose to linger. They say I'm the wickedest woman in Carolina, Julian. Perhaps I'm still worth a stare."

"Be honest, for once," he cried, amazed at the sudden surge of hate that all but choked him. "Brooke was more than you've admitted so far. When Vinson threatened Peabody as the only banker in Wilmington, Brooke put a knife through his back."

"So they say," she murmured, and her eyes were still downcast, still utterly virginal. "It's something they'll never prove."

"But it's true—isn't it?"

"Quite," said Lucy in a sudden vibrant whisper, and the eyes she lifted were blazing now. "Does that shock you too much?"

"It was he who tried to murder Noah Heath on the doorstep of my surgery?"

"Right again, Julian."

"And he who wrote that note warning me to get rid of Jane or—see her murdered too?"

"I'll tell you more," said Lucy. "I sent Brooke to Raleigh two days ago to kill Hume Sanderson—before that red-neck could do more harm. I imagine that job is over now. He rarely fails——"

"And Jane's next—if you can find her?"

"Your uncle Clayton is hunting Jane at this moment with his best bloodhounds," said Lucy. "That's why I called you to Wilmington."

He stood his ground with an effort. "So your paid gang will do the killing this time?"

"If they can find her," said Lucy calmly. "After that Report, you can't blame them too much."

He had never seen her smile like that before—the weary grimace of a woman older than sin, a woman who has put the world behind her, finally and forever. "Thanks to that wife of yours, d'you realize how much it's costing your uncle to keep out of an army jail?"

"I can bear that news with fortitude."

"She hoped to destroy me too," said Lucy. "Or to drive me out of Wilmington. Unfortunately I've too many friends in Washington; I'm keeping my ill-gotten gains." Her voice had the same odd tone of

withdrawal now. When she lifted her eyes, he was astonished to see that they were brimming with tears. Once again he masked his surprise—and remembered that Lucy, like all finished actresses, could weep at will.

"Are you wondering why I say all this, Julian?"

"Nothing you do can surprise me any more," he said coldly.

"I'm helping you to see me as I am," she cried. "It's quite true that I'd have killed her a month ago. It's too late now for revenge."

"You're asking me to believe this warning is genuine?"

"They're beating through the swamp now, looking for her. Perhaps she'll escape them—perhaps not. You know where she's hiding, don't you?"

Again he held his ground and did not speak. After Jane's attack at the masquerade Lucy would never believe that they were out of touch with one another.

"Go to her, Julian—if you're wise. Tell her she's done more than enough. Make her leave Carolina. It's the least you can do tonight if you love her."

"Will you stop this acting and tell me what you really want?"

"Your forgiveness, darling. I can't leave Wilmington without it."

"But you aren't leaving Wilmington!"

"I sail for Le Havre tomorrow," she said. "Dr. Moreau insists."

With those words he understood the reason for her tears; he could almost believe the warning came from her heart. "Are the gossips right again, Lucy—about you and the doctor?"

"Dr. Moreau is not my lover. He's my physician and nothing more. His hospital happens to be in the French Alps. As I say, he insists we go back to it together."

"It's tuberculosis, then?"

She did not wince at the question. "Odd, isn't it, that I should survive yellow fever and die of a consumption of the lungs?"

"You won't die, Lucy."

"Dr. Moreau hopes to cure me—but I don't share his views. That's why I tried to—make my peace with you before I go."

"If I say I pity you, will you believe me?"

"I don't want your pity, Julian. I don't ask any man to pity me. Just promise to warn your wife before it's too late."

"If I can find her."

She put out her hand and winced a little, for the first time, when he drew back. "Say we part friends, at least."

"It's often been said that the devil is a woman, Lucy. You've all but convinced me——"

"Don't hate me, Julian. Remember what we had together."

"The devil can quote scripture to make a point. I suppose I'll understand your point someday. Shall we let it go at that?"

He walked out with his head high, knowing that it would be fatal to look back. He was in his saddle again and halfway down the road to Chisholm Hundred before he realized that he did not believe a word of her story.

If Jane were in real danger, he thought bitterly, Lucy would have held her tongue and let her chief rival die unmourned. Hoyt, too, had insisted that the bushwhackers had camped on Gator Island. If the Klan had discovered that much, an attack tonight was inevitable. It was quite possible that Lucy had called him to Wilmington, delayed him with her preposterous story until the attack was over, and released him in time to discover his wife's body swinging from a cypress limb.

At this moment, he thought grimly, Lucy is probably laughing at me in Moreau's competent arms. He had discarded the tearful story of her illness long ago. A woman of that stripe, he thought, seldom dies in bed—certainly not from so romantic an ailment as a consumption of the lungs. If she goes abroad tomorrow, it's only to romp with her new lover, certain that I'll be fair game when she returns.

And yet, now that he had come this far, he had no choice but to turn down the old logging road in the swamp, to rein in at the hollow tree where he and Hoyt Marshall were in the habit of caching their robes between their rides with the Klan. The robes were musty from long disuse, but they would serve his purpose tonight. Dr. Julian Chisholm could vanish in their white folds; a nameless marauder would ride on to the Hollow, ready to take part in any work the Cyclops ordered.

Silence pressed upon his senses out of the clinging dark, as though his were the first footfalls to disturb this wilderness. As he remounted he had the sudden conviction that eyes were observing him out of the black tunnel of road just behind, and he felt his skin prickle when the first thud of his horse's hoofs seemed to find a dim echo there in the black maw of night. Then he forgot his fears in the tricky business

of holding the trail, which was marked here and there by faint blazes on the trees where the corduroy roadbed faded into muck and the real swamp began.

The Hollow seemed to leap at him out of the darkness with the first glint of the fire on the cypress boles. His heart plummeted even before he rose in his stirrups and sent the usual password winging ahead—the mournful warble of the whippoorwill. As he had feared, there was no answer, no stir of life around that dying fire. They've come and gone, he thought. Probably they're storming the island now from both sides of the river. But even in that despairing moment he could not believe that Jane had been surprised so easily. Or that she would allow herself to be cornered by Clayton Randolph's night riders, no matter how formidable their numbers.

He knotted his bridle on the limb of a mimosa tree—the same mimosa that had sheltered him the night of his initiation. At the fire he found a bundle of lightwood knots, and lit one at the embers to study the hoofmarks in the clearing. As he had suspected, at least a hundred mounted men had gathered here not too long ago, to gallop en masse down the dim trace that led from the Hollow to the river's edge, a scant mile away. If there's a plan to this, he thought, they left no evidence in that muddy charge; perhaps they're so sure of their quarry they're risking a head-on attack. And yet, strain his ears as he might, he could hear no sounds of firing from the river.

The frightened nicker reached him too late; he whirled with the lightwood knot held high above the white cone of his cap and stared hard into the darkness, trying to pick out the darker shadow of the mimosa tree and the silhouette of his mount. The nicker was repeated, and he heard someone slap the horse's muzzle, heard the unmistakable whisper of booted feet on the grass at the clearing's edge.

I *was* followed after all, he thought. At the moment I'm being stalked as expertly as a hunter might mark a quail in the underbrush.

"Hold the torch just so, Doctor. You make an ideal target."

"Who's there?"

"Your personal nemesis, sir. Jason Brooke by name. It was thoughtful of you to don those white robes. I might have lost you otherwise."

Julian continued to hold the torch high while he tried hard to locate Brooke's actual presence. The voice came from the left of the mimosa tree. It was clear that Lucy's bodyguard had chosen the spot deliberately, to keep the fire at Julian's back.

"I thought you were in Raleigh."

"I was. What's more, I did the job of work that Mrs. Sprague ordered."

So Hume Sanderson had gone to join the other enemies of the Klan. Julian wondered why Brooke had made the avowal so calmly. But of course there was no point in secrecy now. Brooke intended to send him to join Sanderson.

"May I ask your present job?"

"You may indeed, Doctor. Always aboveboard, that's my motto. I watched you go into the Hall tonight and I watched you leave. Mrs. Sprague hoped you'd come here—and you did. She hoped you'd lead me straight to your wife's hideaway. Just in case our friends in the Klan bungled the job."

So Lucy's purpose was clear at last. She had called him to Wilmington for just one reason—to arouse his fears. Once he had come this far, she believed he would go on until he reached Jane's side. Brooke's role was that of the hunter who stays close behind his retriever and fires at will.

"You've done your job badly," Julian said. "Why didn't you let me go on?"

"You misjudge me, Doctor. I've no reason to kill your wife—except that Mrs. Sprague ordered it. But I've every reason in the world for killing you. So I'm trusting your wife's execution to the Klan—and enjoying my revenge in my own way."

"What have I done to you?"

"You've taken Lucy from me."

"That isn't true, and you know it."

"She's had other men. That's her nature. I can endure that. But I was always the one she turned to—even when she was married to Sprague. When she tired of those others, it was *I*—and I alone—who gave her what she wanted. Do you understand me, Doctor?" The man's voice had risen to a thin demon's wail. "Do you know what it means to want a woman as I've wanted Lucy—and lose her?"

"Why blame me?"

"You're the one thing she loves and wants. And the one thing she's never really had. She's used all the tricks she knows, trying to possess you; she'll break herself trying, if I don't save her tonight."

"You talk like a madman."

"And what if I am a little mad? I'm still the man she really needs.

She'll come back to me in time—when she tires of Paris and that bull-necked Frenchman. I don't mind him, God knows—he's just one of her diversions."

Brooke swayed as he spoke. Daring to take a step nearer, Julian caught the reek of gin in the darkness. At the same time, the torch glinted on the snouts of the pistols in the renegade's fists, held low at his sides and steady as steel. He's drunk enough to miss the first shot, he thought. If I'm fast enough—if I can put that fire between us . . .

"Why tell me all this? You know I'm unarmed. Why not get it over?"

"D'you know when I first planned to kill you, Doctor? When you walked out of her bedroom at the Hanover House three years ago. Wouldn't you say my patience was admirable?"

"There was nothing between us then."

"I knew what was coming. Even better than you. You'd have been dead long ago if she hadn't sent me abroad on business."

"Will you get this over?"

"In my own way, Doctor. Drop that torch and walk toward the fire."

So he's shooting me in the back, thought Julian. When he returns to Lucy, he'll say that I fell in tonight's fighting—and who can prove he lies? And yet something in Brooke's blurred speech caused him to pluck up a kind of crazy courage even in this deadly moment.

"Can't I see it coming, Brooke? Won't you grant me that?"

"You were a fair duelist once, Doctor. You should appreciate the chance I'm giving you. True, I'm shooting you through the back, but I'm letting you run across the clearing. And I won't shoot until you reach the fire."

Julian measured the distance. The fire was a good hundred feet away.

"What comes after, if you miss?"

"A man hunt through the swamp, of course. One I'll enjoy thoroughly. Start walking, Doctor, and don't run until I give the word."

Lifting the clinging robes that snarled his boots, spreading sleeves and hem as wide as he dared, Julian began to approach the fire step by step. Knowing that the white dolman made a miss all but impossible, he could also hope that Brooke's shot would pass harmlessly through an outspread sleeve. Sensing the tension that was building in his

would-be executioner, he prolonged his walk deliberately, holding each pace as solemnly as though this were his own death march and he bore his coffin on his back.

"Run, blast you! Run for your life!"

He hunched his shoulders and plunged toward the fire, waiting for the click of the hammer that would spell his doom—or his slim chance of survival. Already his eyes roved over the bed of glowing embers, searching for the first handy missile. He found what he sought at once—a lightwood knot with a splintered handle, still burning briskly on the edge of the fire. A poor weapon, it was better than nothing—if he lived to reach it.

The hammer clicked, and he rolled with the sound, throwing himself desperately in the direction of the burning torch, twisting his body away from the pistol's roar. The sheer impact of his dive sent him sprawling in the outer edge of the coals; he felt the bullet's impact—so close that for one numbing moment he was sure he had been hit. Brooke, he realized, had fired low deliberately; but, thanks to his fall, the bullet had thudded into the earth, missing his back by inches.

The second hammer click grated at his nerve ends, but the torch was already in his fist, and he risked everything to rise on one knee and brace himself for the throw. The stench of burning cotton was in his nostrils, and he knew that his robes had already caught fire; the skewer of pain at his side could be nothing but a live coal that had seared his flesh. He forgot the pain to follow the parabola of the sailing lightwood knot—and had his reward when he heard Brooke side-skip to avoid being hit.

Careless of his robes, he ran straight through the fire, putting its glare between him and that pistol. He was in the dense undergrowth that masked the swamp at the end of the Hollow, beating down the smolder of his robes as he ran. Brooke was running, too, but the fire was still between them. Julian caromed from a small oak sapling and flung himself behind a cabbage palm just as the second pistol roared. A shower of leaves dusted his high-peaked cap as the shot went wild. He held his ground, watching the darting silhouette of his hunter in the flame-lit clearing. For the moment he was safe—and certain enough of his ground to let Brooke make the next move.

"Stay where you are, Chisholm—I'm coming after you."

He saw that Brooke was at the fire, sorting over the remaining light-

wood sticks until he found a torch that would burn brightly enough to guide his aim. In another moment the man hunt would begin in earnest among the cypress knees just behind him. There was no time to tear off his disguise as he began to back into the swamp, testing each footfall lest it betray his presence. He could only pause to tuck up those grotesque robes as best he could, then grope for a handhold in the tangle of wild grape overhead as his foot slipped in the viscous mud. Brooke was trailing him, with a sputtering torch held high and death clutched in his fist.

Watching the cruel probing of the torch among the cypress boles and its fluent forward thrust as Brooke pinned down his wavering white quarry just ahead, Julian saw that his chance of escape was dwindling fast. Even now, with a head start of sorts and a knowledge of the terrain that enabled him to dodge the worst of the jungle undergrowth, he knew that there was no chance of losing his nemesis. With no light on his side, it was inevitable that he should blunder into blind alleys from which there was no possible exit—wild tangles of palmetto and bramble and saw-tooth swamp grass that forced him to retrace his steps, plunge blindly at the next open slough, and slither on, with Brooke's torch moving ever closer.

Already Julian was breathing in great, choking gasps and cursing just as breathlessly as each gasp enabled his hunter to pin-point his pursuit as coolly as a marksman with a battalion of hounds flairing ahead of his rifle sights. Already Brooke had unlimbered the heavy army pistol, so that it swung on a lanyard at his neck, an extension of his own lunatic hate.

"Flounder on, Doctor! I'm enjoying this much more than you!"

Julian flung another spent curse over his shoulder and plunged deeper into the next jungle impasse. This time, by some minor miracle, the saw grass parted under his frantic hands, to reveal the chocolate-dark surface of a brook—a dog-leg stream that turned sharply as his trembling legs splashed into its shallow current. Brooke shouted just behind him; the torch darted like a cat's eye in the humid darkness, pinning him there in the midst of that sluggish flow. He hunched his shoulders once again and waited for the shot that did not come. To his shame, he realized that the renegade had paused deliberately on the bank he had just quitted, holding his fire along with his animal enjoyment of the chase.

Julian turned the dog-leg corner of the brook, letting his feet discover a hold in the slimy bottom as he ran frantically for fifty blessed feet of open water. Then the wild grape lashed at his face again and a humpbacked cabbage palm, crouched across the stream bed like a witch in a nightmare, forced him to scramble for his life along the far bank.

They were really in the swamp now, and some instinct that went deeper than his boyhood memory of this same hunting ground slowed his steps. Behind him the fatwood torch made the hunter's progress easy, even as it outlined the hunter's target. Here, where he struggled onward in the saw grass, the ground itself was water-filmed, criss-crossed with interlacing roots that tripped him at each step. Moving on hands and knees, clinging to every piece of cover, he strove to follow the stream bed, though the bank was no longer a bank, though he was forced to cling to each shrub for support, lest he sprawl face down in the ooze and rise to stop a bullet.

One step more—and the gumbo all but claimed his boot top. He forced himself to take the step just beyond, though he had all the sensations of a man stepping from a cliff's edge into a pea-soup fog, certain that his boot sole would find nothing but thin air. Mercifully his groping fingers curled round a strand of grapevine held firm by the tangle overhead; using that green rope as a kind of giant swing, he whirled boldly into space, skimming the bog like some awkward night bird, and squdging to a safe landing on a hummock.

His foot touched a log that erupted into sudden, violent life and waddled into the darkness on four squat legs, lashing its armored tail. A half-grown 'gator, he thought, and hoped he had not blundered into a wallow. He breathed cautiously, his face close to the brackish water film, and found no hint of the lilac-sweet aroma that marked a 'gator lair. Pray God it was a stray, he thought, and plunged on across the hummock—just as his pursuer, using the same grapevine swing, landed with a cat-foot thud on the spot he had quitted.

Another armor-plated log exploding into life underfoot and hissing defiance from a yawning white maw. The torch picked out the bear-trap teeth that snapped at empty air as Julian flung himself to the left and scrambled down the crumbling slope of the hummock. This time his nostrils had caught the sweet, deadly odor of the wallow a fair distance to his right; he knew that Brooke, a swamper as adroit as he,

had also moved to the left, running in a wide arc along the safe spine of the hummock to cut off his retreat.

No choice now but to plunge straight ahead and pray that the ground would hold. For a dozen strides his foot found bottom of a sort. The next step confirmed his worst fears. This was no longer muckland, not even the gumbo that nourished the great cypress knees. This was the bog proper, quaking faintly in the darkness, bubbling with a monstrous heartbeat all its own. Resistless as water under that first fatal step, it claimed foot and knee instantly in its jellylike embrace; thrown forward by that sly pressure, his left foot sank even deeper, sucked down almost to the thigh.

Quicksand . . . The unspoken word blasted his brain, robbing him of thought as he reared back with all his strength, striving to undo the blunder of those first two strides. He remembered this bog now all too well; even by night its shape was outlined clearly by the gray-green bubbles (luminous under that canopy of palm and wild grape) that exploded from the devil's caldron beneath. As a boy he had watched a wounded deer vanish in this same quagmire with a scream that still echoed in his brain. . . . But it was he who had screamed tonight—and screamed yet again as his brain meshed at last, forcing him to lunge forward, lifting one prisoned foot with an effort, working his toe in an arc to find some purchase on the bank.

Again the empty horror of water that changed in a flash to clinging jelly, of a bank that was only a nest of saw grass thrust up in forlorn tufts a good eight feet from solid ground. Both knees were trapped now. The bubbles chuckled all around him in the fluid sand, daring him to risk another stride. He knew he must move or perish. Sprawling face down in the saw grass, he just managed to writhe free, to inch forward a precious yard with all the desperation of a sick snake. Then, as he strove to rise, the quicksand claimed feet and ankles anew, sucking him inexorably downward, until his boot tops were covered one more time.

He flung his arms skyward, closing his fists on empty air. Then something solid came into his hand at long last—something that held under his wild tugging, balancing the downward suction of the bog. Even in that cave of darkness he could see that it was another creeper, swept down from the denser tangle above in the last of the winter storms. Now, hanging a scant five feet above the surface of the quag-

mire, it made a ready liaison between death and life—if only it would support his weight.

He risked a harder tug and waited breathlessly for a tearing sound above. The creeper still held firm. Then he heard Brooke shout from the hummock and caught the first fatal wink of the torch among the cabbage palms. Forgetting even the horror of the quicksand in that greater threat, he put all his weight on the vine, watching the young water oak that supported it bend like an immense longbow there on the sanctuary of the bank.

For an instant the tree crackled ominously, and the sound seemed the voice of doom itself; then, as though it possessed a mind of its own, the fresh green wood took over, lifting him inch by inch from the bog as the tree trunk righted itself.

He watched his knees emerge from the watery tomb, then his boot tops. Abruptly, as the leverage of the rising tree trunk began to operate in earnest, his whole body rose from the quagmire, which oozed shut behind him like an angry mouth. The vine-clogged treetop whipped upward, tossing its plumed head defiantly, as though it relished this victory over the swamp. Catapulted skyward, with his death grip on the grapevine still intact, Julian rose a good ten feet in the air, to disappear among the vines with all the grace of a homing bat.

A picture returned from his boyhood—a game called "birds," which he and his brother and Hoyt Marshall had played by lassoing the tops of pine saplings, bending the trunks double, and riding them skyward as the supple wood returned to its original vertical. Sometimes the intrepid soarers had risen a good twenty feet from the ground, clinging for dear life to the resinous tuft of the pine, twined there with every limb lest they be flung free, like a pellet in a slingshot.

The memory saved his life tonight, helping him to cling with teeth and toenails until the quaking tree had righted itself, holding him secure in the leafy heart of the branches as Brooke's questing torch moved nearer. His lungs still panted like broken bellows; it took all his strength to still that agonized gasping for air, to make himself small among the leaves when the Englishman charged to the very lip of the bog and paused beneath the tree itself.

He saw that Brooke reeled a little as he walked—and understood why, when the Englishman pulled a flask from his pocket and drank

deep. Evidently he was too fuddled to note the peril just ahead—and too intent on the man hunt to realize that Julian hung precariously in the bower of grape leaves a scant yard above him.

Thanks to the bobbing light of the torch, Julian could see the tortuous path they had just followed through the palms on the hummock—even the weedy tangle of the 'gator wallow to the left, and the comparative safety of the cypress knees just behind the Hollow itself. It seemed incredible that this endless hide-and-seek could have occupied so small an area.

"Put up your head, Chisholm! I've had enough!"

The renegade lunged forward as he spoke—a long stride to anchor a boot on one of the saw-grass tufts that dotted the bog. His next stride took him even deeper, into the very center of the quagmire. For an instant Julian thought that his enemy—thanks to the light of the torch—would pick his way across the quicksand in safety. Then he heard Brooke's bellow as one boot sank knee-deep in the clinging ooze, saw the Englishman pitch forward in the grip of death. Brooke's bellow changed to a scream; the lightwood knot, flying from his hand in a long arc, struck upright in the brambles, bathing his struggle in a witch's glow.

Julian tried to shout down the doomed man's screams, but his throat would not admit the sound; he could only stare wide-eyed at the Englishman's desperate thrashings. The quicksand, pulling like a living, evil thing, had already dragged him hip-deep and, thanks to his spasmodic movements, had tightened its grip beyond any hope of succor, even had Julian possessed the means.

Brooke's fist closed in saw grass, tearing at this frail support with all his strength. The grass, ripped from the bog by its roots, showered wildly about his head and shoulders as the bog itself crept inexorably upward, from belt to waistcoat, from waistcoat to armpit. Remembering the cry of the wounded deer, Julian wondered why Brooke's own wailing seemed pitched in the same key: perhaps, at this last extremity, man and beast were one. Certainly there was nothing human in these howls that seemed to split the night.

The sand was neck-high now. Sick with horror, Julian watched the renegade's arms go down, one by one, as Brooke made a last, flailing effort to lift himself from the bog, only to find both arms and hands were prisoned too.

Already Brooke's cries were fainter now that the concentric grip of the sand had begun to crush his lungs; they ceased entirely as the bog closed at his neck. For an instant the face seemed to float in that watery caldron. Julian felt sure that Brooke was staring up at him with eyes that threatened to pop from their sockets, even as he realized that the Englishman had ceased to see long ago. The lips opened there in the ooze that roiled the surface of the quagmire: a final scream escaped from bursting lungs.

After the head had vanished, a hand thrust briefly from the heart of the quicksand. A signet ring winked in the torchlight as the fingers clawed at empty air. Then the hand vanished in turn. The quicksand seemed to heave, as though the swamp were chuckling soundlessly at a joke all its own. A final burst of chocolate-dark bubbles rose from the spot where Brooke had vanished—and the bog was still.

XI

Julian never remembered his return to the Hollow. He knew that he had tumbled from the tree and snatched up the lightwood knot with shaking hands. Somehow, in his rush for higher ground, he had avoided the 'gator wallow and the potholes in the creek. Now he was standing in the screen of cabbage palms that divided the clearing from the swamp, feeling the thud of his heart ease back to normal. Already he could hear the hoofs on the river road, mixed with a confused babble that could have but one meaning. Even before he could douse his torch and drop into the shelter of the palmetto scrub, he was sure that he had only escaped one horror to blunder headlong into another.

A hundred horsemen, at least, had galloped toward Gator Island an hour or more ago: he had verified that much by the tracks on the road. Perhaps half that number were returning now, by that same road, with a dozen captives whooping despairingly in the van. He could verify that fearful guess even now by rising a little above the palmettos, though it was too soon to separate captor and captive in that whorl of brown dust that rose against the bobbing torches of the cavalcade. How could he doubt that Jane and her bushwhacker troop had yielded at last—or that the Klan was driving its prime enemies toward the Hollow with a rope around each neck?

The wide arc of horsemen burst into the clearing with what at first glance seemed a dozen giant roosters within the arc, scrambling to keep free of the crashing hoofs. Julian all but rose from his hiding place as the cry of exultation choked in his throat. It was the bushwhackers who rode high in their saddles tonight, the Klansmen who stumbled in the dust.

Torches swooped to the earth even before the riders could box the Hollow, outlining the scene with gleeful clarity. The Klansmen, stripped of their robes, tarred to the eyes, and daubed with a monstrous dusting of feathers, still seemed more birdlike than human as they capered in the grass of the Hollow, dancing to avoid the occasional cut of a whip, the casual revolver shot that seemed to spurt dust between their toes. Only the high conical caps identified these feathered creatures for what they were. With their other regalia torn aside, they were more comic than pitiful, a cross between dunce and barnyard fowl.

Clinging for dear life to his palmetto screen, Julian watched Amos Martin ride out to the grass and bend to kick the dying fire into life. Two last riders streamed around him, to toss heaping armfuls of pine knots on the embers. As the fire leaped, the feathered captives cringed away with squeals of terror, only to be prodded closer by the hard compulsion of a dozen carbines.

"Jump, you Cokers! Jump for your lives!"

Two feathered captives, lank as wading cranes, backed off from the fire on trembling legs; Julian saw they were Hugh and Jeff Coker, stripped to their boot tops. A whip sang through the air as they hesitated, drawing a quick pattern of blood on a white-tufted back. Hugh howled with pain and flung himself recklessly at the blazing mass of pine knots, sailing through the smoke with a scissors-hitch jump that would have been a credit to any athlete. Jeff followed, stumbling at the edge of the blaze and backing up for a fresh start—a blunder that earned a second cut of the whip.

For an instant Julian was sure that the victim had plunged into the fire. But the elder Coker was already on his feet beyond, beating out the blaze on a badly singed leg as he scuttled for the safety of the corduroy road, pursued by the whoops of the bushwhackers and a last warning shot.

"Over you go, Nason!"

"Hit the grass, Colonel!"

"You too, Stevens!"

Hearing the roll call, Julian perceived that this was indeed the elite of the local Den—lieutenants to the Cyclops, down to the last man, and fire-eaters all. One by one the Klansmen ran the last gantlet, singeing legs and arms as they went over the blaze, rolling in the grass beyond to beat out the flames, and stumbling blindly on their way.

"Ups-a-daisy, Randolph!"

"Run, man! Don't waddle!"

The Cyclops flung his fat body down the lane of horseflesh, bawling curses as he ran and dodging the bushwhackers' whips with clumsy agility. At the fire's edge he paused, unable to summon courage for the leap. Amos fired coolly from the saddle, sending a bullet singing through the cone-shaped cap, a contemptuous inch above the wearer's crown.

"All your boys made it, and some are fatter. Jump, owl-face! I won't miss you again."

A whip curled round Randolph's ankles, sending him sprawling before the fire—close enough to draw a cloud of gray smoke from his feathered shoulder. Up again with a final bellow, he plunged rather than leaped through the spouting smoke, somersaulted on the grass beyond, and skated into a patch of mud at the roadside before the smoldering tuft of his posterior could spout flame in turn.

The whole Hollow rolled with laughter as the former brigadier, still skating on his posterior, reached the open road, blundered to hands and knees, and vanished into the night with a final howl of agony.

"Look here, Amos! I've caught me another!"

Julian had already risen from the Palmettos, with the gun barrel hard against his spine. Amos wheeled his horse and rode easily across the clearing. Evidently a stray Klansman, flushed belatedly from the scrub, was no novelty in the mountain man's book.

"Does he carry a gun, Tom?"

"Course not. I already looked."

"Got some extra tar handy?"

Julian moved closer. "Look again, Amos."

The mountain man blinked once before his whiskers creased in a grin. "Howdy, Doc. Better late than never."

"I'll grant you I'm an inactive member of this Den. Apply the tar, if you insist."

But Amos had already waved the guard aside. "Don't be huffy, Doc. Why d'you think we're here in the first place?"

"I'd give a great deal to know."

The mountain man lifted a foot from his stirrup and scratched thoughtfully. "First off, you might call this a routine patrol. Reckon I can say *that* much, now you know what your wife is really after."

Julian held his tongue. Amos would tell tonight's story his way or not at all.

"I'll say more, now I've seen your face again. It looks honest by torchlight."

"Thanks for that much, Amos."

"Every so often we give the nightshirts a workout—just to see how frisky they're feeling. Do I make myself clear?"

"Fairly."

"Take the breed of nightshirt in this county. Most of 'em are barn burners—or back stabbers. All of 'em have carpetbag lawyers to cover their tracks. Specially when they pick a nice piece of property they'd like to buy cheap—after the rightful owner has been chased across a state line."

"I said I was a member, Amos. I know the score as well as you."

"Maybe you don't know there's nothin' breaks quicker than a coward—once you tear off his mask. *That's* why I call this a routine patrol. You saw how easy they scared, once we'd slapped on the feathers."

Julian found he was grinning too. "Then you came here deliberately?"

"Sure. First off, we let that uncle of yours pick up a rumor we'd be camping tonight on Gator Island. Funny thing, Doc—that's just where we *were* camping—until an hour after sundown. Left a fire burning and all the trimmings. Left enough clues—if that's what you call 'em—to make like we'd headed for New Bern, to do a job of work on that side of the river. Do I still make myself clear?"

"Don't tell me they followed a trail to New Bern?"

"They did just that, Doc. Hell for leather, and howling for our blood. All but the Cyclops and his assistant nightshirts. As you may have noticed, they try to stay behind when there's real fighting afoot."

"The picture's complete now. Where did you ambush General Randolph?"

"On the corduroy road—not a hundred yards from where you're standing. So help me, they rode into it like rabbits. Let us jump 'em to the last man without firing a shot." Amos slapped his thigh gleefully at the memory. "By that time, of course, we outnumbered 'em—five to one. You might say we *scared* 'em into surrender."

"And the tar and feathers?"

"That was all my idea, Doc. Miz Jane said we could have our fun but she'd stay out of this party."

"Where is she now?"

"Waiting for you," said the bushwhacker calmly. "Why else would we come this close to Chisholm Hundred?"

Julian's heart gave a great leap. "Her work's over, then? She's coming back?"

"Not while there's a night rider left in the county, Doc."

"But I don't understand. You say she's here——"

"Sure. Came back to see how you've managed things. Figured you'd turn up in your own nightshirt, once you heard she was in the swamp."

"Are you telling me that this show was—planned in my honor?"

"Why not, Doc? As I say, we knew you'd turn up sooner or later—looking for your lady. 'Tisn't often that we can combine business and pleasure, if you'll excuse the expression."

"Where is she now?"

The mountain man grinned in earnest. "You asked that once, didn't you? How well d'you know Gator Island?"

"I've hunted there often."

"Then you can find the cave. She's gone back there to camp for the night. . . ." Amos seemed about to say more but let the words trail off as Julian dashed for the tree where his horse still waited and gained the saddle in one leap.

"*Wait, Doc!*"

Hurtling down the river road, Julian only half heard the mountain man's shout. He glanced back briefly, realizing that Amos was pointing at his robes and flapping his arms like an eagle. Then he forgot Amos completely in the promise of what lay ahead.

She's come back to me, he thought wildly. She'll belong to me, for tonight at least. When this county is free of the Klan, she'll belong to me forever. The thought carried him down the short sweep of road in a hand gallop. At the riverbank he flung himself from his mount

and plunged for the water, careless of his flaring robes and his mighty splashings, his whole being projected forward to the dark bulk of the island beyond.

Thanks to the winter drought, the ford from mainland to island was only waist-deep. Brambles tore at his robes as he climbed the sandy bank, but he did not even pause to search the trail that led to higher ground.

Most of Gator Island (hunched like its namesake against the bank, with the main body of the river to the west) was covered with open piny woods, with a few clumps of palms in the hollows and a dense screen of water oaks along the river. Walking was easy after he had thrust his way through this first barrier, though the sandy soil dragged at his boots. The cave, he remembered, opened under a sandstone bank at the top of the island, with a tangle of bay grape masking its mouth; he had camped there overnight on hunting trips. . . . Tonight, he thought, I could find that cave blindfolded. I can even afford to pause an instant, to catch my breath in earnest, before I meet her again.

It was good to stand there among the dark pines, letting the empty quiet descend like balm on his spirit. Already the horror of Brooke's death and the bizarre scene in the Hollow seemed part of another world. Nothing was half so real as the solidity of the tree trunks about him, the whisper of sand at his boots—and the promise that waited just over the shoulder of that grass-covered dune ahead.

Here was the path he knew so well, skirting the side of the dune. There, in the cleft of trees ahead, was the ravine that led straight to the cave's mouth. Already he could see the faint glow of a fire in this natural land pocket. Feeling that his heart would burst its bounds, he slogged on toward the yellow glow, pausing just before he reached the ravine to weigh the wisdom of shouting his wife's name before he burst into her presence. . . . At that precise moment he heard the whisper of another footstep on the trail he had just quitted.

An instinct that went beyond thought brought him instantly to his knees in the shelter of a palmetto clump. Death had stalked him once before tonight—would he repeat the same cat-and-mouse game before he dared seek Jane out?

Perhaps he had only imagined the sound. He dared to rise and continue a few paces farther; and this time the whisper of trailing foot-

steps was unmistakable. He whirled in time to see a darker shadow moving quickly among the pines, freezing into a silhouette that he could not distinguish from the smaller tree trunks.

Could Amos have blundered for once? Was this a lone Klansman, overlooked by the bushwhackers, waiting to be led to Jane? Clearly it was impossible to move closer to the cave until he pinned this intruder down.

Again on hands and knees, with a safe screen of palmettos between him and that motionless shadow in the pine grove, he considered his next move. It was possible, of course, that this unknown enemy had already surprised Jane and murdered her; in that case, the best he could hope for was revenge. . . . Moving cautiously, knowing that this crablike progress would not betray his presence, he crawled on hands and knees around the palmetto clump, glided soundlessly over the top of the dune, and worked his way back to a spot above the pine grove.

At first he thought that the intruder had departed. Then he saw a figure rise from a smaller palmetto clump and peer intently at the entrance to the ravine. Now that the need for concealment was gone, he moved swiftly. Half running, half sliding in the cascade of sand, he moved down the slope of the dune and leaped for his enemy's throat.

A branch cracked underfoot as he leaped; the figure turned, lifting a shoulder to break the shock of his charge, forcing him to drop his arms in a flying tackle. For an instant they rolled wildly in the sand as he clung grimly to denim-covered legs. In that same instant he realized that the limbs in his grasp could never belong to a man. With the shock of that discovery he knew whom he had stalked—and who had stalked him in return.

Releasing his wife with a gasp of laughter, he let her scramble free, and made no move to detain her as she streaked for the ravine and the cave's mouth. She was deep in the cave when he parted the tangle of vines; for an instant he thought he had lost her in the dark. Then, as a coal exploded in the open fireplace between them, he saw that she was standing with her back against the far wall. A cocked carbine, locked expertly between her side and her elbow, was pointed straight at his chest.

"Put up your hands, and come forward slowly."

He tried to speak, but his voice still croaked with laughter. Too

late, he understood the import of Amos's last shouted warning. In these tattered robes, by the uncertain glow of the fire, Jane had mistaken him for a Klansman.

"Don't you know me, darling?" He forced the words at last between his crazy bursts of laughter. "Must I—stop a bullet—now I've come this far?"

"Tell me who you are," she cried, and he saw that she was as overwrought as he. "Let me see your face."

"I tell you, it's Julian! Have you been away too long to remember?"

The gun barrel did not waver. "If you're Julian—why do you wear those robes?"

"I've worn them for the last time, Jane."

He stripped the white cloth from his back and flung it into the darkness. The cone-shaped hat tumbled into the fire and burst into brilliant flame. In that gust of light he saw her staring face and read recognition in her eyes at long last.

"I wanted to make you come to me," she said, and her voice had a strange, muted quality, as though she were arguing to convince herself alone. "I—knew you'd come like this, didn't I? Why does it startle me now?"

"They forced me to join the Klan," he cried. "All my friends were members. All my kind——"

"I know," she said quietly. "Its motives were good—not too long ago. But you should have known better, all of you."

"We know better now, Jane."

"The Klan has never been stronger."

"I tell you its days are numbered here. From this night on I'm fighting it with all I have. Others will join me in time." He paused before her silence. Somehow he had not expected their reunion to begin on a strident note of argument.

"The facts are on the record," she said. "The Army has a good man in Wilmington—as of now. After tonight the Klan will go under cover and bide its time. Until they change commanders. It will never die out—here or anywhere in the South—until the whole South rises against it."

"Give us our chance, Jane."

"I've waited so long!" she cried, and her voice had a high keen of hysteria. "I've worked so long, trying to help you to see the truth. All

of you——" Her voice broke on that, and he watched the tears stream down her cheeks without daring to take her in his arms. The carbine was still a potent threat between them.

"Give me my chance, Jane," he said quietly. "I've waited a long time too."

"I know. I wanted you here tonight. I planned to have you here!" She forced calm into her tone, but the gun barrel was still level and still deadly. "Now that you are here, I can't seem to see you clearly. All I can see is those robes you were wearing."

"You're coming back to Chisholm Hundred," he said. "We're putting this long nightmare behind us, starting tonight."

"Won't you face reality even now? Can't you understand that your uncle would have you shot without mercy—if he even guessed we were here together?"

"You don't believe that yourself, Jane."

"Wait and see. When you try to resign. If you do mean to resign."

"Don't you trust me even now?"

"Of course I trust you. But I don't want you to die because of me—or my beliefs."

"They're my beliefs too, Jane. And they're well worth dying for."

"It was wrong of me to come here," she said wearily. "I've done all I can—in this part of Carolina. The people themselves must finish the job now."

"I asked you once to leave that to me."

"And I shall, Julian. But you'd better go now."

He stared at her for a long, taut moment. "Is that all you have to say?"

"My work is far from over. I must be in Florida next week—and Savannah the week after——"

"You're here tonight," he said. "We both know why you sent for me."

"I—couldn't help wanting you, Julian. It's been so long—so terribly long."

"But you don't want me now?"

"It's safer if you go," she said. "Safer for us both."

"Will you shoot me if I come closer?"

"Try me," she said, and her voice was cool as the steel barrel of the carbine.

He crossed the makeshift hearth in one long stride, letting the gun muzzle press against his chest. "I wouldn't mind too much, Jane. Living without you isn't living at all. That's another thing I learned on my own. Wasn't it clever of me?"

As he spoke he struck the gun muzzle aside with his open palm; when she opened her lips to scream, when he saw that hysteria had claimed her at last, he struck her hard across the cheek, then swept her into his arms to kiss the spot where his blow still flamed.

"Can't you see I'm all yours—and you're all mine? Won't you admit that nothing else is more important: or is that a reality you're afraid to face?"

He lifted his hand again, but there was no more need for violence. Already her hysterical laughter had melted in tears. Her arms were around his neck now, and their bodies met as one.

"You're right, Julian. It's been so long—so terribly long."

"But you'll go again tomorrow."

"I'll be back, darling—believe me, I'll be back."

Her first kiss matched his own—and he, too, forgot the need of words.

IV

The Rallying

i

LOUIS stepped back, out of the cone of light above the table. "You did your best, Julian. No one could have saved him—including you."

"Thanks for your vote of confidence, Doctor. I may need it in the near future."

"Will you close the wound or shall I?"

Julian let out his breath in a weary sigh. "If you don't mind, Louis—I've had a long day."

"All your days have been long this year. I should have handled this alone, of course. But if there was a chance of saving him——"

Louis let the thought complete itself, unspoken, and returned to the operating table, where the body of Hugh Coker lay twisted in its final agony. The Klansman's robes were beside the table, where Julian had tossed them in his struggle to save a life. Forceps still hung from the gash in Hugh's abdomen, like a swarm of steel parasites. Both doctors had probed in vain in their effort to control the last deep hemorrhage that had lost the younger Coker's struggle with death.

"If we'd clamped that big bleeder a moment sooner——"

"I tell you, Julian, there was nothing a doctor could do. He was ambushed, cut open with someone's knife—or bayonet—and left for dead. It's unfortunate that he was found on Chisholm land and that he was still living when they brought him here. You might call that last fact a miracle, if you like."

Julian sighed again as he remembered the faces of the two riders who had left Hugh at the surgery door. Both were Klansmen. They had come to Chisholm Hundred because there was no other haven within riding distance. . . . The Den will have their report by now, he thought. This will be the last straw, of course. If Hugh had lived, they

might have let me live in peace for a while. Now that he's dead I'll be accused of his murder. Or, at best, of standing by this table and letting him bleed his life away.

Louis, clearing forceps from the wound, spoke without lifting his eyes from his task. "It had to happen sometime, my friend."

"Will my uncle consider that?"

"Surely they'll remember the night riders you saved before and after you resigned."

"They've been waiting for an excuse—ever since we changed generals in Wilmington. Something the county would believe in. They have it now."

Louis continued to work calmly, tossing the last forceps into the waiting basin, closing the slashed abdomen with neat, housewife stitches. "The whole county will believe you tried to save him."

"I wish I had your faith in my—my allies. I wish I could name a few——"

"My guess is you'll find more than a few right in the Den. And if General Randolph does order an attack——" Louis paused on the word, and his eyes darkened with a cold rage. "He may find he's evenly matched, for once."

"Since Hudnall returned, the Klan has been stronger than ever. Who'd dare fight on my side?"

"Stand firm and find out."

"I intend to—stand firm. But Hudnall is selling rifles direct to my uncle these days. Surplus army stock, he calls it, from the Wilmington arsenal. The Klan is the law at present in this corner of the South. And I've flouted the law."

"Wait. You may be surprised."

Julian glanced at the body on the table. "Will you send for the dead wagon?"

"It's waiting now. And I still say that Randolph won't dare to order an attack because of—this. Hudnall or no Hudnall."

"At the moment I'd give a great deal for your optimism."

Louis just escaped smiling. "Walk into the fresh air and draw a deep breath. You've been driving yourself too hard ever since the crop came in. You should take time to look around. See what you've accomplished, Julian. I tell you, it's too solid for any pack of vultures to destroy. All they can do is flap their dirty wings and envy you."

"Or give me five days to leave the state."

"Breathe deep, my friend, and look at your handiwork. You know it's here to stay."

It was Julian's turn to smile. "You don't believe a word of this, Louis. In your heart you're convinced I'm slated for destruction. So, for that matter, are you—if you insist on staying here."

"Should I return to New York and rejoin Noah?"

"Noah was wise. He has a flourishing practice now."

"You might even come with me," said Louis dryly. "We could flourish together."

"Sorry, Louis. I prefer to die on my own doorstep."

"And I'll die right here, if need be."

"See? You do believe it's coming."

"We've waited eight months for them to strike. Ever since your resignation was—official. So far they haven't risked it. You know they're cowards—to the last man."

"They're over two hundred strong now. They can call on the Den at New Bern for help, if need be. How long can I hold them off with twenty bushwhackers?"

"Admit that Lafe has done a magnificent job. Your uncle can't possibly know your exact strength."

"Unless Hoyt has told them."

Louis covered Hugh Coker's body with a sheet and stepped from surgery to dispensary. Neither of them spoke as Louis scrubbed in the washroom beyond. The fact that their own plantation lawyer continued to ride with the local Den was something that had never been discussed openly. So long as there had been no positive move on the part of the Klan, Julian had not protested Hoyt's continuing membership. At times he had felt it was an advantage to have an agent in the opposite camp. . . . The South was full of such contradictions today, he thought. Friends could turn into enemies overnight if the need arose.

"You know that Hoyt would side with you if the test came," said Louis.

"That's still my belief. I hope it's accurate."

"He still hopes you'll make your peace with Randolph and come back."

"It's a subject we've ceased to discuss long ago. Hoyt must know that I'll never budge while Jane lives."

Louis Rothschild looked hard at Julian and seemed about to speak. "You're a loyal husband, my friend. It's too bad your loyalty goes—unrewarded."

"I think we've said enough, Louis."

"More than enough. Walk through that door and look at the monument you've built to—to her vision. Believe me, it'll outlast all the vultures in the world."

ii

He followed Louis Rothschild's advice to the letter, taking the path to the ridge, pausing to breathe deep before he looked out across the bottom lands to survey his domain. A gray twilight, heavy with the promise of unfallen rain, was closing on the river, but he could see his boundary marks clearly in the afterglow. Perhaps it was the crepuscular light that gave the house and its wide spread of outbuildings a dimension larger than life. It's really a monument, he thought—to something bigger than I'll ever be. Does it matter who finished it, when it was Jane who laid the foundation stones?

There, where the work road joined the turnpike, was his brand-new seed mill with its long line of wagons awaiting their turn at the unloading platform. He had risked most of this year's profits to build those seed presses, over the advice of both Hoyt and Macalastair—and the venture had already proved its worth. Each day planters from three counties brought in their wagons, to take away their quota of cottonseed oil, along with the nutritious mash for their cattle pens. Sometimes the mill rumbled through the night before the last load was cleared. . . . Would the Klan destroy that shared enterprise merely because he had dared to resign from their ranks?

Along the river bluff the gins stood in an imposing row, like miniature factories, on their high-stilted foundations. Here, too, the top-heavy cotton wagons waited in long rows. Ever since his own bumper crop had been baled and trundled to the warehouse at the water's edge, those gins had been roaring day and night. . . . He smiled inwardly as he counted over the names of the planters who had availed themselves of his machinery and the skilled hands he employed. More than half the names were on the roster of the local Den.

A ponderous side-wheeler, already deep-loaded, echoed with the shouts of the stevedores at the dock's end. At the bank a long string of barges, stacked with pyramids of baled cotton, nosed upstream, hunting easy water for the long journey to Fayetteville. Here a newly opened mill (financed by Yankee capital) had just begun to buy cotton at bonanza prices, provided the planters could guarantee its transport. More than one Cyclops from the neighboring Dens (and he could name them, too, to the last man) stood to profit from that string of barges. . . . Would they dare to destroy their owner because his philosophy did not square with their own?

Knowing the answer in advance, he retraced his steps on the path and paused, halfway down, to watch the windows of the great house come alive with light, one by one, as the heavy, rainy dusk possessed the land. Roy and his staff had orders to light each of the downstairs rooms seven nights a week—as though the master expected a hundred guests. Somehow it made the evenings easier to bear, knowing that Jane could see her home from the turnpike if she chose this night to ride in again.

There were Carolinians who believed as he believed—men who realized it was their duty to provide honest labor, at honest wages, to black and white alike. True, some of these men were newcomers from the North who had bought up the plantations of émigrés now huddled in tarnished splendor abroad. Forest Blake, for example, had built a brand-new mansion just around the river bend; it would rival Chisholm Hundred's own cotton crop in another season. The Bradley family (from the Yankee corner of Tennessee) now owned the old Cable place upriver from Wilmington—and spoke a patois deeper than any Southerner's, in a vain effort to prove that they "belonged."

It was men such as these, *nouveau riche* or otherwise, who stood ready to dominate the South of tomorrow when relics like Randolph Clayton were no more. Like all interlopers, they were both good and bad. All of them would stay out of his duel to the death—this finish fight from which the Klan was now almost certain to emerge victorious.

For a time, as Jane had predicted, the Invisible Empire had lived up to its name in more ways than one. Frightened by the chapter-and-verse exactness of her Report, driven from the roads by the more than efficient patrols of a suddenly aroused Army, they had permitted a

kind of false peace to descend on the county, broken only by sporadic outbursts of violence. And then, as their still powerful bloc in Washington (working day and night to whitewash such leaders as Clayton Randolph) had succeeded in clearing Hudnall of all his charges, the night riders had appeared again, burning and terrorizing as before.

It was said freely in Wilmington that Lucy Sprague (while presumably convalescing in a sanitarium in the French Alps) had paid the fees of lawyer and lobbyist alike. They said it was she who had bought up the surplus army rifles, so that Randolph's assassins might carry extra firing power in their saddle boots when the time came to close on Chisholm Hundred.

Meanwhile, as Julian had noted grimly, an uneasy courtesy had prevailed. Eager to process their cotton at the best price, men who killed by night had flocked to his plantation office by day to appraise the wealth of Chisholm Hundred—and to use its gins and its seed press. He had received them without comment, hoping, even then, that they could work together in peace.

Now, as he watched the twilight shut down, he understood the strategy of these gentlemen well enough. Making sure that their own cotton was safely shipped—well ahead of the Chisholm bales—they had merely bided their time. If they struck now, before his own crop was battened down and well on its way to Manchester, he might still be ruined. Even now he could be forced to surrender to the palsied but still powerful grip of George Peabody.

If the blow came, it would come soon: he could feel that in his bones no less keenly than the bite of cold in the air. As usual, he had behaved like a fool in trusting rascals so far. All the same, he was glad that his sincere attempt to help friend and foe impartially was engraved on the county's memory.

He heard a horse neigh in the stable yard and guessed that Hoyt Marshall was preparing to ride out to another meeting of the Den. Obeying a sudden impulse, he quickened his pace, rounding the corner of the blacksmith shop at the precise moment the lawyer cantered through the stable archway—debonair, as always, in doeskins and shovel-brim riding hat, his face a taut, drink-raddled mask. Hoyt still did his work well in the plantation office; Macalastair had had nothing but praise for his contribution to the current well-being of Chisholm Hundred. But it was common gossip that Hoyt was drink-

ing himself into a swift decline—and all Wilmington knew the cause had arrived, not too long ago, direct from Paris.

"The dead cart is loading now at the surgery door," said Hoyt. "Should I accompany it to the crossroads for the sake of form?"

"Haven't you more pressing business on my uncle's estate?"

"I see you keep well informed."

"Don't think I'm spying, please."

"You must resent my membership in the Den, Julian."

"It's still a free country, Hoyt. So free, at the moment, that the Army sits in barracks and lets us settle our quarrels as we like."

The lawyer took the remark in silence. When he spoke again, he kept his eyes on the elegantly gloved hands that held his reins. "You could do worse than come back, Julian."

"I've resigned from the Klan. The Cyclops has my written withdrawal, and the date is eight months old."

"No one resigns from the Empire."

"What's more, my uncle knows why I refuse to—keep up my membership. So do you. In fact, Hoyt, I'm surprised you reopen the subject."

"I think it's high time you made peace with them, Julian."

"There can be no peace between the Klan and me. Not until one of us is dead."

"Don't talk nonsense. The Klan runs this county—and it means to stay."

"The Klan could be broken tomorrow if one landowner defied it and made the defiance stick."

"Is that your present plan?"

"It's been my plan ever since——" He could not bring himself to mention the bittersweet memory of his last night with Jane. Instead he said only, "Alive or dead, I'm loyal to Jane and her ideals."

"I'm saying nothing against Jane. I never will. But you must admit she's dead. And you can't be a law unto yourself forever."

"I've done nothing outside the law except defend what's mine. Uncle Clayton knows he's a stuck hog if he rides down that driveway. So do the nightshirted cowards who ride behind him. You might repeat that warning tonight—and say I've a hundred rifles to back my words."

"What else have I said at our other meetings? Last night I even

raised the number of those rifles to one hundred and fifty. The exact number of our Den, if you don't count those across the river. Unfortunately our Cyclops was not impressed. He seems to know our strength to the last man."

"Not from you, Hoyt."

"Never from me. What's more, if they vote an attack, I'm joining you at the first barricade." Hoyt kept his eyes low as his voice dropped to a bitter whisper. "I'm far gone in rum, Julian. I'll venture to guess you know why. But I can still shoot straight when it comes to helping a friend."

"That's all I want to hear, Hoyt. Go on to your meeting. I've no right to keep you."

"And I've every right to urge you to accompany me. It isn't too late to bear an olive branch——"

"Clayton Randolph and I are enemies to the death. Can't you see that?"

"He won't be our Cyclops forever. Other men are eager for the office. Reasonable men who'd see your point of view."

"You know the die-hards are in control. If my uncle resigned tomorrow, Jeff Coker would be the new Cyclops. A man who still insists a Negro is an animal that talks."

"Don't we all, Julian?"

"Why d'you think I've opened a school here?"

"Because it was Jane's pet idea."

"Because our Negroes must be educated today if they're to become citizens tomorrow."

"How can you make a black man work—if you teach him that he's your equal?"

"I'm doing just that, and we've more workers here than we need. And we're prospering, Hoyt. *That's* the one fact that esteemed General Randolph can never forgive."

Hoyt smiled thinly. "I'll leave you with the last word, my friend. You won't have it forever. Better join the heavy artillery before it's too late."

Julian stood for a moment in the stable arch, watching the lawyer's horse thunder into the driveway. Hoyt rode his mount as though to the manner born; from a slight distance he seemed the perfect cavalier. No outside observer, seeing him take the road at a gallop, would guess

at the decay within—a dry rot that went far deeper than his passion for drink, his blind desire for Lucy Sprague.

Obeying a sudden impulse, Julian called for his own mount and took to the driveway in turn, at a speed that would give Hoyt time to clear the gateposts before he, too, reached the turnpike. The dead cart had just turned in from the work road, to continue north—a way that led past the entrance of Randolph Hall. What he saw on the highroad just outside his own gate caused him to rein in sharply and pull back to the adequate shelter of the live oaks along the drive.

The yellow-wheeled phaeton had halted just outside his gate, with a groom at attention on the box. Hoyt Marshall, bending in his saddle, was arguing furiously with the occupant, who presented only the toe of one slipper to Julian's view as she leaned back against her carriage cushions, accepting the tirade in silence. From where he waited Julian could not quite catch Hoyt's words, but he could guess their import. It was an accepted fact in Wilmington that the lawyer was no longer numbered among Lucy's part-time lovers. Since her return from abroad she had refused to receive him at Marshall Hall, even when others were present.

"Is that your final word?" The question was shouted as Hoyt rose in his stirrups and lifted his riding crop; the groom in the carriage box, immobile as a black obelisk, seemed deaf to the threat. So, for that matter, did the lady in the carriage, for she sat unstirring as the whip faltered in Hoyt's hand and Hoyt himself slumped in the saddle, all passion spent.

"Go to hell your own way, then," he cried. "I shan't stop you—now. Just don't go too far, my happy harlot. That's no idle warning."

He wheeled with the words, snapped back to his ramrod-straight cavalryman's seat as he took to the highroad in a whorl of dust. Julian found that he had ridden through the gateposts without pausing to think; that he had held up a detaining palm as Lucy's groom clucked his horses toward the drive.

"You've come far enough, Mrs. Sprague."

Lucy stirred at last in the depths of the carriage and leaned forward with her best smile. He saw that she had never been lovelier, never more blooming; her eyes invited him closer with all their remembered sparkle. He noted these facts coolly, with no emotion beyond a well-

controlled rage. The lure of Lucy Sprague was behind him at last. Conquered firmly (and not without scars), it belonged to the past now.

"So I've come far enough, Julian? That's just what Hoyt was saying. I don't understand——"

"You understand me perfectly. There's a well-concealed guard on that gate day and night. You can't see him at the moment, but he'd stop your coachman with a bullet."

"A warning, you mean."

"I said a *bullet*, Lucy."

"Thanks for remembering my name," she murmured, and let her eyelashes flutter. He watched the first tears sparkle. Why had he ever been touched by her tears?

"We've gone a bit beyond warnings on both sides."

"Come closer, Julian. Don't sit in that saddle like justice on a pedestal. Let's try to talk like friends."

"Why did you come here? You knew I'd never let you past the gate."

"I came to warn you, my dear. You might say it's a final warning. Of course if your ears are closed——"

"I've had enough of your tricks, Lucy. Right now I'm remembering the night you sent Brooke to follow me." He watched Lucy narrowly, wondering if she had given the disappearance of the Englishman a second thought. Brooke's body had never been recovered from the quicksand, and she could have no way of knowing how he died.

But Lucy dismissed the interruption with a gesture. "What's past is past, Julian. Don't hold it against me now."

"You sent him to kill Jane. You hoped I'd lead him to her hiding place."

"If I swore I knew nothing of Brooke's plans that night—or where he's vanished since—will you believe me?"

"I'll never believe you again."

"Very well, Julian. Let's admit we can never be close. Let's face the fact that you're still loyal to that madwoman of a wife—even now, when you know she's dead."

"You may hold your tongue, Lucy—and be on your way."

"This is a public road," she said. "I'll stay—and you'll hear me out. I've come to buy Chisholm Hundred. Will you sell?"

"Why waste words?"

"I'm giving you up as a man," she said calmly. "I still want your land. I'll have it—at my price."

"I'm glad I'm safe from your wiles, Lucy," he said dryly. "They're far more dangerous than your—wolf pack."

"Thank you, Julian."

"May I advise you to handle the wolf pack with care? They bleed, you know—just like honest men."

"Speaking of blood," she said, "my wolves have been howling for yours—for a long time now. Really, I can't restrain them much longer."

"So I've you to thank for our immunity?"

"I've been on your side from the beginning. I've seen your best interests—and tried to make you see them. I can't be your guardian angel forever."

He felt his fingers curl round his riding crop and understood just why Hoyt had raised his arm. "So you're taking credit for our success here?"

"Everyone knows you'd have gone under in '65 without my money——"

"Peabody's loan, you mean. At ten per cent interest. Chisholm Hundred has been his best risk."

"Chisholm Hundred was always mine," she cried, and for the first time there was genuine passion in her tone. "Now it shall be mine in fact. Jane's dead—she can't begrudge me my dearest wish. You're doomed without me. So I take what I want at last—at my price. It would be higher if you'd include yourself in the bargain."

"May I ask when the attack is coming?"

"You'll know soon enough," she said, and her voice was level now, as though she regretted her outburst. "I could stop it even now if you'd be—reasonable."

"Tell me one thing. Why have you waited so long?"

Lucy leaned back in her carriage again with a small, resigned shrug; her laughter, when it came, was heavy with mockery. "I'm a woman, my dear. Even when I returned from Paris I hoped you'd love me—for myself alone."

He squared his shoulders and lifted his hat with all the gallantry he could muster. "Tell your wolves I'm quite ready."

"I saw the dead cart leave just now," she said. "That's a bit of luck

for your uncle Clayton. He's been telling the county that you're a radical and a nigger lover. Now he can say you're a murderer too."

He raised a fist to strike her then—and remembered, just in time, that he was in the shadow of his father's gateposts, to say nothing of a tradition that insisted woman was the weaker vessel. Lucy's laughter gave way to a warm, deep-throated chuckle.

"I'm glad I've made you angry at last. I'd almost forgotten you could be—human." She leaned forward with a small, imploring shrug, as though she hoped for his surrender still, and offered him an envelope on her open palm. "Forgive the melodrama, Julian, but this is your last chance."

"Good evening, Mrs. Sprague!"

"Good evening, Dr. Chisholm!" She nodded to her coachman with the words and tossed the envelope on Julian's saddle as the phaeton whirled by.

He snatched it mechanically, knowing what it contained even before he saw his name scrawled across its face. He sat for a long moment in the saddle, weighing the Klan's calling card between his hands, then ripped the seal and spilled the seven lead pellets on the saddle. With blank, staring eyes he watched them fall to the grass. . . . Seven days to close out his affairs and leave the state. Seven days to yield to Lucy—or die in the bonfire his enemies would make of Chisholm Hundred.

His fist struck the pommel of his saddle, a furious blow that set his horse rearing. He soothed the animal with a gentle palm and burst into a gallop down the turnpike. Sweeping round the bend like some dark Pegasus, streaking past Lucy's phaeton as though the wickedest woman in Carolina had ceased to exist, Julian ignored her cry as he bored into the darkness.

The challenge had been offered and accepted. He had one more enemy to face before the fight was joined in earnest.

iii

The gate of Randolph Hall was unguarded tonight. So, he found, was the driveway—and the broad service road that branched to the left, toward the barn that was the arsenal of the local Den. He rode on

at the same hard gallop, cursing Clayton Randolph (and all his works) in the same tired whisper. Here, if he needed proof, was the final arrogance of the Klan, the cool assumption that no one would dare approach its headquarters unguarded or unheralded. Here, too, was his last hope that reason might prevail over his uncle's rage at his long defiance—a final defiance, in short, that would test the solidity of Clayton Randolph's power.

It was a slim hope at best, he thought, sawing his mount's gallop to a brisk canter. He let the canter fade to a gentle walk and rode under the arch of China trees that gave on to the Randolph stable yard, staring down the sleepy guard who rattled to attention in the doorway.

"Stand and give the password!"

"Dr. Chisholm—and I need no password."

The man growled in his throat and lifted his rifle. Julian slapped down the barrel and rode boldly into the barn and the semicircle of mounted, high-cowled riders who slouched there in their saddles, awaiting their officers and the night's orders. Knowing the routine of these raids, he had timed his entrance perfectly.

Whether he left alive seemed unimportant at the moment. He had shocked them into attention by his boldness. It was enough to hold their eyes now, to pray that they would hear him out.

"By God—it *is* Chisholm!"

He half recognized the speaker and bowed ironically from his saddle. Another horseman nudged out of line: he knew it was Hoyt by the coloring of the horse.

"What are you doing here, Julian?"

"I've come to talk to Randolph," he said quietly, and once again he gathered eyes around the barn before he continued. "Bring him out, if he's sober."

"Did you get the bullets?"

The speaker this time was Jeff Coker: he knew the voice and the tall figure whose pointed hat seemed to gather cobwebs from the rafters. "My condolences, Jeff," he said as pleasantly as he could. "We did our best for Hugh——"

"You murdered my brother, Chisholm. The whole county knows it."

"Dr. Rothschild signed the certificate. He'll tell you we did all we could——"

"That Jew is in your pay. We're sending *him* a warning too."

"Be honest, Jeff. If you think I harmed your brother, why don't you call me out? Why hide behind a mask to accuse me?"

Jeff Coker did not reply, but the eyes in the circles of his hood were cold with hate. The murmur that rose on either side gave Julian his first lift. Most of the voices were still hostile, he knew, but he could sense that few of these men believed the trumped-up charge.

"Where's my uncle, gentlemen? Or is he afraid to accuse me to my face?"

He heard a bustle in the rear ranks and saw the Cyclops ride forward. Clayton Randolph did his best to tower in the saddle, but his figure was not suited to horseback. Despite the grotesque tapering hat and the sweeping yellow plume at its crown, he still looked pudgy as he moved to the front rank between Jeff and Hoyt.

"How dare you come here tonight?"

"Take off that hood, Uncle. It makes you sputter."

"You've no right to be here——"

"If you must know, I came at the request of your lieutenant, Hoyt Marshall. I've denied it, but he tells me I'm still a member."

"Cover him! He may be armed!"

Julian lifted both hands as he heard rifle hammers click in the half-darkness of the barn. Jeff himself rode up to slap his belt for a hidden pistol.

"What d'you want here, Julian? Every man in this barn knows you're no longer one of us. I doubt if you ever were."

"Take off that cheesecloth, damn you. Face me, man to man!"

He felt the rifles bore into his body as he rode forward, but it was a chance worth taking. No one stirred as his fist closed in Clayton Randolph's hood, but the whole barn seemed to growl in unison when the mask ripped free, exposing his uncle's popeyed scowl, the trembling of the wattles under his lazy man's beard.

"Tell me frankly, Uncle—why are we enemies?"

"Does that question need an answer?" Randolph whirled to stare at his henchmen. The expected response thundered forth. But it was oddly mechanical now—the howl of the mob answering on cue.

"Why are you trying to drive me from the state?"

"Shall we tell him, boys?"

But Julian's voice rose instantly above the mob rumble. "I'll tell

you, Randolph. You sent me the bullets for just one reason. The woman who pays you wants my land. The woman who bought you this arsenal, and that horse you're riding, and that Yankee gun in your boot. Don't deny it—you *all* know it was she who delivered the warning——"

"Mrs. Sprague honors us with her help," shouted Randolph. "As for the warning, it's no less than you deserve. You can thank me for those seven days—and the fact we're letting you go alive."

"But I'm not going."

He watched his uncle's wattles go from red to imperial purple, saw the eyeballs strain at their sockets. For an instant Randolph seemed unable to speak. When he spoke his voice was tired—a clever orator's trick, aimed to impress the Klansmen rather than Julian.

"So this is the reward for my—generosity?"

"How much is Mrs. Sprague paying you for this job, Uncle?"

"I won't submit to such insults."

Julian turned his back deliberately on the unmasked Cyclops and faced the hooded circle. "That means he won't answer. So I'll tell you, instead. He's getting the quarter section to the north. The bottom land that adjoins his own. Mrs. Sprague will take the balance."

He heard his uncle gasp and knew that the shot had hit the mark. "That's why I'm here, gentlemen. To ask how such barefaced thievery can continue—if we're to call ourselves a state. To demand why an innocent man must be hounded from his land to satisfy a neighbor's greed."

Silence was his answer. I *did* catch them by surprise, he thought. No one believed I'd accuse my uncle to his face.

"Will someone answer me? Of what crime am I guilty?"

A Klansman behind Randolph lifted his hand. "You're a renegade from our ranks. You're a nigger lover—a yankee lover——"

Julian knew the voice instantly: Thatcher Randolph, a remote cousin of Clayton's, who had spent the war as a general's aide in Richmond.

"I fought for the South, Thatcher," he said quietly. "Did you smell powder?"

Someone guffawed on the outside of the circle, and the sound picked up an answering ripple of laughter. Julian spoke quickly, before it died. "I won't argue with the bombproofs in your ranks. Or the

thieves who always work best under cover. I'm speaking to all of you —probably for the last time. I want you to understand clearly why I left the Klan. I joined—as most of you did—because it was all that stood between us and chaos. When I saw that the Klan was only creating a deeper chaos, I resigned. I believe in my heart that some of you would have gone with me gladly—if you had dared."

He risked a pause then and stared around the circle. Thanks to the masks that hid all but Randolph's face, he could not tell if his words had reached a single brain.

"Now you have sentenced me to exile, with a death penalty if I refuse to go. I've told you why—and your own leader has yet to answer the charge. Is that all the gratitude you show me—after I've ginned your cotton at the lowest rate in Carolina? After I've saved your winter stock with my seed press? Yes, and saved many of you from death—when I rode in your ranks and after?"

"Must we listen to more of this, gentlemen?"

It was Randolph at last, his wattles still gleaming purple, his voice croaking with rage. The murmur that drowned his question was far from universal, though a clear majority of horsemen had begun to cluster about their leader. But the note of dissension, however faint, encouraged Julian to continue.

"Will you withdraw this threat—and let me live in peace?"

The roar of refusal, loud enough to send the bats whirling in the rafters, all but shook Julian from his saddle. Again he plucked up courage of a sort as he noted that the bellow, for all its volume, had come from the group around the Cyclops.

"Then I stand and fight," he said quietly. "Would it be simpler if we rode into the yard, Uncle Randolph, and shot it out between us?"

"You can get off my land, Julian," said Randolph. His voice was much calmer—the sorrowing orator again, grieving for an unrepentant sinner. "I've had enough bombast tonight. So have we all. And we know you'll go quietly."

"You could shoot me down now, of course. Prove you're a coward as well as a fool."

"Will you leave my land? Or must we carry you?"

"I'm going now. I've said my piece."

Julian rode to the barn door, forcing himself to walk the horse. In the clear, with the open stable yard before him, he turned for a part-

ing shot. "One last bit of advice, gentlemen. I'm sending this threat to Raleigh tonight, and I'm naming names——"

"The Army will keep out of this quarrel, Julian."

"For the present, yes. That's understood. But those names go on the record, nonetheless. I'm appealing to your sense of fair play—to everyone here who knows what such words mean. Ride out of this thieves' den with me tonight—and stand beside me when the test comes. Or if that's more than you care to risk, refuse to follow this fat bandit. Give me a fighting chance."

He rode out with that last shouted challenge, feeling the silence stab at his shoulder blades. In a way, that silence was more painful than a bullet—and as damning.

Then he heard the drum of hoofs in the yard and knew that a half dozen horses had broken from the group to follow in his wake. Hoyt, of course, he thought, riding hard without daring a backward glance. He touched spurs to his mount and took the curve in the driveway at a crashing gallop. Able to count his followers now without showing weakness, he saw that six men in all had followed Hoyt from the barn—and that all of them were tearing off their robes as they galloped after him: General Stedman and the general's two tall sons. Judge Bowen and the Judge's brother from his Wilmington law office. Paul Saunders, his journalist friend, who had certainly entered the Den that night in masquerade.

The sky ahead had opened to let in the last of the angry sunset; despite the threat of rain, he saw that the evening would be clear, with a promise of moonlight later. A bad night for raiders, he thought grimly, and yet Randolph must make his first strike sometime before dawn if he's to hold his gang together. He reined in on the turnpike to let the others overtake him, and felt his eyes fill as they crowded round to press his hand.

"Conference of war now, gentlemen," said Hoyt. "Follow the leader to Chisholm Hundred—and stay close when you turn in. *That* gate is guarded."

The ride seemed miraculously short now that he had friends around him. The cheers of his bushwhackers along his own driveway were part of that triumph. So was Lafe's salute on the portico, and the knowledge that ten hard-eyed riflemen awaited his orders on the dusk-dimmed lawn. He walked down to meet them, with Lafe beside

him, letting Hoyt usher his companions into the house. Still a bit dizzy from the risk he had run—and its aftermath—he found he could plan calmly enough now that he was on his own land again.

"They'll go for the gins first, of course. We must bunch our rifles there."

"We got twelve guards on the roof now, Doc," said Lafe. "Behind mattresses, with extra rifles. And fires to shoot by, if they jump us before moonrise."

"Did you say *twelve?*"

"And another dozen along the drive, as you saw."

"That makes thirty-five, counting yourself. We had only twenty this morning."

"Maybe you got more friends than you figured."

"Are you telling me that fifteen new men came today from Amos?"

"From Amos, Doc—*and* Miz Jane."

His heart gave a wild leap, but he kept his voice level. Lafe would take orders from Amos Martin and say no more than was needed.

"Are they coming back to us, Lafe? All the troop?"

"Don't rightly know, Doc. These new boys rode up from Charleston —that's all they can say. Amos took the rest into back country——"

"And my wife?"

Lafe regarded him, unsmiling. "Reckon she's with the others. Same as always." He dismissed the question with a shrug and turned toward the landing stage. "That British ship went out with the tide, loaded to the scuppers. We'll anchor the barges in midstream in the next half-hour. Go on with the loadings at sunup——"

"Tell me this much, Lafe. *Is my wife alive?*"

"Didn't I just tell you she sent us fifteen men? D'you want guards on the dock, too, if Randolph moves in from the waterside?"

Julian yielded before the bushwhacker's stony stare. Lafe had spoken his piece for today; he would say no more.

"I think we should concentrate fire power around the gins. If they attack at all tonight, they'll only hit and run."

"That's my idea too, Doc. We'll be ready for visitors then—soon's I post these new rifles. You can go join your company."

"I'll do that, Lafe. And thank you again—for everything."

"How come? I'm doin' a job—same as you. No cause to thank me for *that.*"

"I only meant that our cotton is in good hands tonight."

"Let's hope it stays there," said the bushwhacker. "Let's hope that company of yours don't get ideas on their own."

"What do you mean?"

"Stop me if I'm wrong, Doc, but weren't some of those nabobs wearing nightshirts day before yesterday?"

"They're on our side now," said Julian solemnly. "You were quite right, Lafe—we've more friends than I realized."

"We could do with more," said the bushwhacker, and faded into the darkness with another curt nod. The ten guards followed just as silently.

Julian let them go without protest. It was maddening to admit that these men knew more of Jane than it was safe for him to know. And yet for once he could be thankful that she was not at Chisholm Hundred tonight. He clung to that cold comfort and turned back to the portico.

Hoyt, he saw, was pouring whisky for their guests in the drawing room. He paused in the darkened hallway to estimate them one by one. Stedman and the Judge, of course, were too old to fight this sort of battle, but he knew they would fight regardless. Elton Bowen, the Judge's brother and law partner, was a firebrand in court but an unknown quantity behind a rifle sight. However, General Stedman's two sons were rated among the best shots in the county; Hoyt, who had given his proofs on a score of dueling fields, would be no less valuable if they were forced to defend the gins tonight.

Julian lingered a moment more in the hallway. The news of Jane, plunging his mind into a familiar turmoil, had made him reluctant to enter this conference of war. He watched Paul Saunders sight an army pistol at a target with the air of a marksman and guessed that the journalist, too, would pull his weight. For the first time he realized that his guests were heavily armed and that he was still without weapons.

His own pistols were in the library, locked in a bookcase along with the brace of rifles he had brought back from Richmond. He turned toward that retreat, telling himself that every weapon on the estate should be pooled as a logical first step in its defense.

As always, a night light burned beside his desk. With no real surprise he saw that Lafe had already unlocked the bookcase; that rifles

and pistols lay ready on a side table, with a pair of faded Confederate ammunition belts beside them. Somehow it was appropriate that his eyes should take in these details before they moved on to the bright-burning lamp above the desk and the square envelope propped on the blotter.

He knew the handwriting even before he broke the seal. His senses reeled as he took in the import of the words:

My darling:

One of Amos's men will bring you this. He can add nothing to its Contents. Nor can Lafe.

I have missed you more than ever, Julian. Were there Time, I would say more. Believe me, when I say I'll be with you soon, if All goes well. With you for Always, my Own Dear.

Jane

The letter crumpled in his hand as he turned to shout for Lafe. The shout died when he heard the crash of hoofs on the driveway, the sudden, vicious spat of gunfire. The question went unanswered, as it must, lost in the din outside, drowned in the anger that flooded his brain. He rushed out to join in the first defense of Chisholm Hundred, snatching guns and bandoleers as he ran.

iv

Julian pulled up short on the portico, realizing that the others had outdistanced him. Lost as he was in the thick darkness, he could not be sure of the focus of the attack—only that a vague, racing blur of horsemen, storming his gate in a daredevil charge, had swept down the driveway in spite of the guard, cut across the work road, and was roaring south now, firing as the hoofbeats diminished. Flames spouted in the night between the house and the river, and for a sickening moment he was sure that the Klan had accomplished its purpose in that first headlong dash and had reached the jam-packed warehouse between the gins. Then, as the ruddy light bathed the portico and outbuildings, he saw that this was only one of the bonfires Lafe had stacked at strategic points on the lawn to guide the aim of the guards.

Stedman and the Judge, crouched at an improvised barricade where the lawn sloped to the river, shouted for him to join them. He crossed the lawn with his arsenal cradled in his arms, running low by instinct. At that same moment Hoyt Marshall rounded the corner of the warehouse, a rifle in each fist, and dropped down beside the others.

"The element of surprise," he said coolly. "Excellent tactics in any war. Fortunately we had a surprise of our own for the Cyclops—"

"Don't tell me they came by the main gate—"

"Fifty, at least. Hugging their horses' necks and jumping the hedge without a spill."

"I heard them cut across the lawn."

"They knew where they were going—and why. Had a dozen torches ready when Lafe gave 'em his volley." Hoyt lifted cautiously on hands and knees to peer toward the work road. "Think they'll be back?"

"I'm afraid so," said Julian. For the first time he was aware of tumbled bodies on the lawn. Snarled in their white robes, the dead Klansmen resembled outsized laundry bundles—abandoned, for no obvious reason, on that sweep of greensward.

"How many did Lafe bag?"

"Seven."

"All dead?"

"They look dead enough."

"Where are the others?"

"The Judge's brother is on the garden steps with Saunders. I sent the Stedman boys to the roof with Lafe." Hoyt's voice was taut with anger now. "Let 'em come back—we're more than ready now."

Stedman spoke for the first time. "I understood you'd been given seven days."

"This is my reward for defying Randolph." Julian got to his feet, shaking off Hoyt's detaining hand. "I'm going to make sure those men are really dead."

"Keep your cover!"

Voices joined Hoyt's from the roof of the gin, but Julian was already in the open, moving swiftly from man to man. All of the faces were strange—evidence enough that his uncle had already begun to recruit help from other Dens. All had been killed with clean efficiency—shot through the head or heart as they rode into Lafe's deadly cross fire.

"Down, Julian!"

The two rifle cracks seemed to explode from one barrel. He felt a commotion in his hair, felt his hat sail skyward as he dropped on his face beside the body of the last dead Klansman. At the same moment someone coughed from the shadow of the box hedge. A great white shape rose like a ghost in the dark, to crash head foremost among the leaves. Ignoring the shouted warnings, Julian made a final dash for the hedge and dragged the body into the open.

It was Jeff Coker—and Lafe's shot had bored between his eyes.

"Are you hit?"

Hoyt had dragged him by main force to the protection of their barricade. "If you aren't, you deserved to be."

Julian touched his crown with experimental fingers which came away with a few locks of hair but no sign of blood.

"He creased my scalp, that's all."

"It's one of the few times Jeff Coker ever missed." Hoyt's anger vanished in a chuckle. "That's what comes of being vain. He thought he could put a bullet through your head—and lifted his own head a bit to make sure. That's how Lafe spotted him."

The bushwhacker leader had already snaked down from the roof of the gin. Now he whisked behind their barricade and touched Julian's shoulder anxiously. "Sure you're not winged, Doc?"

"Next time," said Hoyt, "he'll let 'em bleed in peace. At least until the fighting's over."

"D'you think there are more?"

"*That* was the leader," said Hoyt. "I saw him drop from his horse when their first charge went by. Looks like he figured on holing in so's he could call shots when they came back."

"Then you don't think that Randolph——"

Lafe spat contemptuously. "Not that potbelly. If you ask me, Doc, he's at home right now—with a map and a bottle—plannin' tomorrow's raid. This is only a skirmish, to see how we're fixed."

"What if they try to filter through the fields?"

"They won't risk that. If they did, we'd blast 'em to hell, knowin' the land as we do. The Klan's way of fightin' is to stay on horseback—hit fast and skedaddle. Tonight they hoped to fire the cotton and end things cheap."

A spatter of shots far to the south brought their heads to the

barricade. "That would be Jud's boys," said Lafe. "Guardin' the quarters—just in case they try to pitch a cross into someone's yard. They'll come back to us now—they haven't any choice."

Listening tensely for the first sound of the returning enemy, Julian knew that the estimate was sound. More by chance than design, the outbuildings of the estate were grouped in a tight rectangle beyond the main house, with the new cotton gins and the low-eaved warehouse between them, facing the wide sweep of lawn. With the river at their rear, the gins flanked the warehouse like the wings of a fortress. The cotton, vulnerable though it was, could be ignited only by a torch thrown at close range—with twenty rifles trained on the rider willing to take that risk.

This much the Klansmen had learned in their first reckless assault. It seemed incredible that they would try again, and yet Julian could read no other meaning in the sudden fearful roar of hoofs on the work road.

Riding in a tight formation, with a torch in every fist, the Klan was a sight to strike terror to any heart. Framed in that dancing light, the riders towered into the stars; the flaring regalia, streaming wide in their headlong rush, seemed to lift both horse and rider on monstrous wings. At first Julian was sure that the troop would hurl itself at the warehouse as recklessly as a flaming arrow. Then, as the first hoofs crashed on the lawn, he saw the leader rise in his stirrups and swing to the left, drawing the formation into an arc, with the nearest horseman just out of rifle range.

"Chaaaarge!"

Twenty rifle hammers clicked on the warehouse roof as the first rider swung in. Whooping like the demons they resembled, and swaying in their saddles to lessen the chances of a hit, the other Klansmen made ready to follow. Julian had seen this maneuver on other raids—the arc of horsemen revolving on its own center at a gallop. It would be a miracle, indeed, if one of those torches did not find its mark.

Trained riders that they were, these hooded figures could give their horses free rein and shoot from the saddle as they swept in toward the barn. But the trappings created to inspire terror were a fatal hindrance tonight. The torches, bathing the robes in a merciless light, made targets of each rider despite their zigzag course. The pistol shots, thanks to the giddy swaying of the horses, could hardly fail to go wild. The

silence from the gin told its own story. Lafe, an old hand at tactics such as these, was holding his fire until the last possible moment.

The first rifleshot, aimed deliberately to cripple a mount rather than a rider, brought the lead horse screaming to its knees, tumbling the rider head foremost on the doorsill of the warehouse. The torch, spun harmlessly from his hand, fizzed out in the grass, and Julian realized that both ground and warehouse had been soaked with river water to lessen the impact of the fire. Lafe had placed his target perfectly; before the second rider could quite rein in, his own horse had tangled with the first and reared wildly to avoid going over. Another rifle spoke from the roof, drilling the rider as he swayed there in helpless silhouette. The third marksman, shooting over the head of the second, brought another horse crashing to earth.

There was no volley from the gin—and no need for concerted fire power. Picked off one by one as their horses' hoofs fouled in the bloody welter before the warehouse door, forced to swerve at the very moment they had picked to toss their torches, the Klansmen were leaving their saddles like puppets snatched into the night by an invisible drawstring. Julian counted ten direct hits before the white-robed line buckled and streamed back to the safety of the outer darkness.

As the attack reeled back there was a belated spouting of fire within the warehouse, doused almost instantly by a well-tossed pail. A few torches still flared at a distance, their sputter lost in the larger flare of the bonfire that Lafe had lighted to silhouette his targets.

The rout moved fast once it had begun. Hunched in their saddles, the Klansmen showed clean heels in the darkness. The leader hung back for an instant, cursing in a fluent, high-pitched voice that Julian knew instantly. With no sense of personal involvement, he lifted an elbow to the barricade and ringed the man's thigh in his rifle sight. A voice that was not quite his own threw back the curses as his finger squeezed the trigger; and the yell of triumph as the Klansman spun in the saddle came from the throat of an older, more barbarous ancestor.

It was the last shot of the action. Long before their leader fell the other night riders had roared down the driveway to the sanctuary of the highroad. Julian surged out to the lawn with his defenders, his throat wide to let out the victory shout.

He made no restraining move when a bushwhacker, springing to

the lawn like an agile ape, smashed a wounded Klansman's skull with a casual gun butt. At the moment the blow seemed an act of mercy—as logical as the coup de grâce Lafe was now administering to a wounded horse with one of the Klan's own pistols. . . . Then Julian saw another bushwhacker bear down on the man he had just unhorsed. His atavistic rage subsided with the tumult in his brain, and he leaped forward in time to knock the gun aside.

"No you don't—he's all mine now!"

"First time we ever penned a skunk," the bushwhacker growled. "They make bad pets."

"Stand back, all of you! I'm taking him to the surgery. Are there any more wounded?"

Lafe spoke just outside the circle of torchlight. "Don't insult us, Doc. This was an easy chore tonight. You might almost say it was fun."

Julian knelt beside the Klansman, who was writhing like a broken-backed snake under his robes. As he began his examination he heard other voices from a distance:

"Seventeen dead, so far."

"Nineteen, you mean. Jud dropped a brace of 'em at the quarters."

"How many in the whole troop?"

"Fifty, maybe. A good bag for one night."

"Think they'll be back again before tomorrow?"

"Not unless they bring Randolph too. And he won't budge without help."

The wounded man squealed under Julian's hands, pulling aside in an effort to crawl beyond the ring of torches. Accustomed as he was to all sorts of casualties, Julian could not help a faint feeling of revulsion even before he stripped aside the mask. As he had suspected, the prize bag of the evening was none other than Thatcher Randolph—whey-faced now and gibbering with a fear that transcended the pain of his wound.

"For God's sake, gentlemen! Show a man some mercy!"

Hoyt spoke from the circle. "Remember what I said, Julian. If they're dead, let 'em rot. If they're wounded, let 'em bleed."

Julian, already twisting a tourniquet high in Thatcher's groin, silenced his patient's moanings with two hard slaps across the mouth —a standard procedure with battle hysteria of this order. My uncle's

a real power in this Den, he thought wryly. Who else could have driven this weakling to ride with the leaders tonight?

"Where's my uncle now?"

Thatcher Randolph looked up with spaniel eyes. "I—I don't know. Why should I know?"

"He ordered you to lead tonight's raid, didn't he?"

"Jeff Coker was leader. I was second-in-command."

"The dead cart will dump these bodies on your uncle's doorstep tomorrow, Julian," said Hoyt in the same dead-level tone. "Shall we string this pig on his gatepost—as an object lesson?"

The wounded Klansman howled in earnest. "I know my rights! You'll take me to Wilmington—I demand a trial——"

"The sort of trial you gave Julian? Where's Potbelly? At home with his bottle?"

"General Randolph—is at New Bern tonight." Thatcher's voice was gritty with fear, but the words came clearly now.

Hoyt moved closer. "At New Bern, eh? That means he's drumming up reinforcements already."

Julian nodded a sober agreement. The raid, it now seemed evident, had been only a feeler—a dashing prelude to the serious attack that must come in a day or two. By this time tomorrow Randolph would know their present strength and the nature of their defenses. With two hundred men to throw into Chisholm Hundred—and a safe command post across the road—he could write off the affair in advance. Nineteen dead and a wounded cousin was a stiff price to pay for such knowledge, but a man like Clayton Randolph was equipped to make that sort of sacrifice.

He turned back to Thatcher, but the Klansman had already fainted, appalled by the sight of his wound—a simple in-and-out bullet hole with no complications. No one spoke as a pair of bushwhackers came forward to carry him to the surgery. Thatcher had told them all they needed to know.

"We'll dig trenches the minute it's light," said Hoyt.

"Call all hands from the fields," said Julian. "If Macalastair's still in Fayetteville, let him stay there; he's too old to burn in another war. But every man will stand by to load cotton until further notice."

"And dig rifle pits," said Hoyt. "Which comes first?"

"The cotton, I'm afraid," said Julian. "If that should burn, we'll

have nothing to fight for." I must risk a visit to Wilmington tomorrow, he thought. The *Lady Nelson* is still in moorings. If need be, I'll bribe that British captain to stand by until our last bale's aboard. Yes, and I'll buy every empty barge on the water front to keep that cotton moving. He turned toward the surgery, drinking in the sudden quiet with all his senses. It was the last breathing spell they could hope to enjoy for a long time.

"Shouldn't you get some sleep, Julian? You've had a long day."

"All my days are long, Hoyt. Get some rest yourself. You need it more than I."

All my days are long. An eon ago (or was it only that afternoon?) he had spoken those same words to Louis Rothschild. They had never seemed truer than now, when he opened the surgery door to help Louis repair yet another wounded enemy. There would be little time for wounded in the days ahead, he thought, regardless if they were friend or foe; a doctor first and always, with a doctor's oath to keep, he must do his share of killing if he meant to survive.

Thank God he would be too busy to brood over that hard choice. Nor would he have time to agonize over that note of Jane's, or to wonder at the special perils she was facing at this moment.

V

Julian walked down the communication trench that led from house to stable yard, remembering to pause at the dog-leg turn to see that the parapet of palmetto logs was an adequate cover, and pausing again at the entrance to their front-line defenses to be sure that the sentry on duty was wide awake on the challenge.

It was three full days since the Klan's running attack, and it lacked a full hour till dawn. Wide awake as any man can be after four hours of dog-tired sleep, he murmured a greeting to the sentry before he thumbed the man back to his own tot of brandy and rest. . . . Three full days, and Chisholm Hundred was still unmolested, save by the wild rumors that pressed in from every side. He hated this last bleak hour before dawn, when the mind's stealthy agility was matched only by the body's torpid acceptance of the worst, and the promise of more to come.

Paul Saunders was due from Wilmington in a few minutes more with the latest news—or, rather, the latest pack of gossip. Julian stared into the velvet darkness; it was hard to believe that at least twenty riflemen lay behind individual breastworks in the park beyond, guarding every possible approach to the estate. Now that they had made every preparation in their power to repel boarders, now that three full days has passed with no threat but rumor, he could even begin to resent the deep furrows they had dug in his father's two-hundred-year-old lawn, the trees they had felled to make road blocks on the drive.

Stedman (a general of cavalry in the late war, and a sound defensive strategist) had been chosen commander by acclamation—after Julian himself had insisted on stepping aside in the older man's favor. No one could deny that the general's plan was as workable as circumstances permitted. A guard of twenty picked rifles was posted night and day—spread in a wide, fanlike formation before the house and outbuildings, with the stable yard its northern anchor, and the solid block of field hands' cabins an adequate bastion to the south. Open for instant use if an attack should come without warning, a deep, well-sandbagged trench zigzagged from truck garden to formal lawn and back once again to the work road and the high brick wall of the stables. The trench had taken two full days to dig, with a hundred Negroes sweating at the spades, but it was worth the effort. Complete with sally ports and fire steps, it commanded both the road outside the gate and the sweep of parklike lawn that lay between that highway and the house itself.

Forty extra riflemen, each with a brace of loaded guns, waited behind the trench walls, ready to join forces with the sentry line when and if it should be driven back. The sixty defenders had orders to hold their positions until the last possible moment. Then, using the communication trench, they could fall back easily on the house and the high walls of the stable yard. Here another defensive position had been prepared, with fresh rounds of ammunition ready at every window, and nests for sharpshooters at chimney pot and iron gable. Hogsheads of water stood on every floor, ringed with fire buckets. As a last resort, the great spiral of staircase in the main hall had been mined, permitting the defenders to fall back to the upper story for a last-ditch stand.

Thirty-five bushwhacker stalwarts, another score of yeoman from small farms nearby, and his own small group of friends constituted their entire force—men who had nothing to lose but the privilege of starving on war-gutted acres. Though it was a motley force, it was well knit; Stedman had demanded discipline from the start. Already, ragged gray uniform coats had begun to appear along the breastworks; the rebel yell had split the sky at each practice volley; and it had taken real diplomacy to prevent their militia from breaking out an ancient Stars and Bars at the rooftree. . . . Three days ago he would never have believed that such a fighting force could be assembled in the teeth of the Klan. He could only wish that it were larger.

No attempt had been made to molest them as they dug their trenches, brought in their rifles, and deployed their guards. Wagons and carriages had passed his gate by the score as cautious fellow planters rode out to take a firsthand look at the beleaguered estate. Twice Julian himself had ventured into Wilmington. He had bought up a score of empty lighters and had dipped deep into his reserve fund to bribe a certain British shipmaster to stand by the Chisholm dock for emergency loadings. Again he had called solemnly at the office of the commanding general to file his report of that first hit-and-run raid and ask formally for the protection he knew would never come.

Copies of these documents (prepared by Hoyt Marshall and signed by the others in turn) had gone to Raleigh, to make the record of Hudnall's perfidy complete. He had watched the record go. He had had deep pleasure in seeing his British merchantman weigh anchor in the estuary and glide downstream with a fortune in Chisholm cotton under hatches. Now he could do no more but join in Stedman's daily rifle drills, take his turn at sentry go—and wait.

There was more cotton in the warehouse, but he could take his chances on losing that. With his bills of sale now on deposit in London, he could defy any legal move that Peabody made to possess the land, even though Chisholm Hundred burned to the ground. Thanks to the natural cowardice of Clayton Randolph, the steady aim of Lafe's bushwhackers, and his own prompt show of strength, he had cleared that hurdle at least. Picturing his uncle's rage at the delay—and his uncle's prudent resolve to make no further move until his superiority was overwhelming—he could take comfort in his small victory.

For a time he had feared that his former slaves would desert en masse after the first attack. He had found that the Chisholm field hand of today—though he was the same man, in essence—possessed a common sense he had never known in the days of slavery. True, the Negroes still vanished at sundown, to hide deep in the swamp in case of another night attack. But they returned with the dawn, to labor hard on the wharves—and they sang at their work, as always, secure in the fact that their wages would be paid at the day's end, that the white man's quarrel was none of their affair.

Far down the driveway someone barked a challenge. He heard a password repeated and saw a gray-clad form loom in the darkness—lighted by a bull's-eye lantern in the hand of a guard. Paul Saunders spoke cheerfully from the deep collar of his overcoat.

"My compliments to General Stedman, Julian. He knows how to run a war."

"Come down in the trench, Paul. What's the news from Wilmington?"

"Shall we report to the general together and save time?"

"I'm on sentry duty."

"Get another sentry. This concerns you as much as Stedman."

Julian's smile of welcome faded. He whistled softly into the night and moved back down the communication trench, surrendering his place to a bushwhacker, who notched his rifle into the slot of the parapet and took up his vigil.

"Follow me, Paul. There's a lantern at the turn."

"I know this trench by heart," said the journalist. "Don't forget, I helped to dig it."

"Forgive the question, but isn't that a Confederate officer's coat you're wearing?"

"A good reporter takes on many disguises. Only a half-hour ago I was wearing a white nightshirt—and riding to a rendezvous of the Den."

"*What are you saying?*"

"Save it for Stedman and the others, my friend. By the way, I hope he's stirring at this early hour."

"The general slept all night," said Julian. "We insisted, so he'd be fresh for tomorrow—I mean today."

"A wise decision," said Paul, and, snatching the lantern from its hook at the corner of the trench, he scuttled for the house at top speed.

Shuttered to the eaves and double-barred at every entrance, Chisholm Hundred was more fortress than mansion in the pale early dawn. They entered, as always, by the grade door of the cellar and mounted to the dining room by the service stair. As Julian had hoped, Stedman was already taking coffee with Hoyt and the Judge; the others had moved out to their posts by now as methodically as though this were already a disputed battleground.

"You've brought news, Saunders," said the general. "And I can guess in advance it's bad." His tone was calm enough; there was even a gleam of excitement in his eyes, and Julian saw at once that the others, too, were in a sense relieved by their leader's words. Come what may, he thought, it's good that the deadlock's ending.

The journalist tossed his gloves on the table and reached simultaneously for coffee and brandy. "They'll attack in an hour, General," he said quietly. "Maybe less if Randolph can whip up his courage."

"How do you know?"

"Are you forgetting that I'm a Klansman in good standing? A wise journalist keeps a foot in both camps."

Paul sipped his coffee for a moment, enjoying their astonishment as much as the brandy. "As you see, I'm wearing the coat of a Confederate officer—borrowed for the occasion from a friend in town. That was my first disguise. It enabled me to ride with a group of extremely intoxicated cavaliers—straight from Calhoun's Tavern to the Den——"

"You'd better tell this from the beginning, Paul."

"I intend to. Unfortunately there isn't much time. So you'd best listen carefully."

The journalist, it seemed, had kept close to his office in Wilmington these past three days, knowing the risk of showing his person abroad, or his sentiments. Thanks to his sub rosa connections, it had been easy enough to keep an accurate check on Clayton Randolph's preparations—including the preliminary rendezvous at Calhoun's, a secessionist club of sorts prior to the war, now a sanctuary where Confederate veterans refought lost battles and recruited openly for the Klan. Whisky had flowed like water at Calhoun's all night long. Group

by group the officers of the local Den (augmented now by recruits from New Bern and elsewhere) had drunk their way to bravado and ridden to the common rendezvous.

Paul, taking his courage in both hands, had mingled with one of the more sodden of these groups—ridden with them from Wilmington to the piny-woods clearing that Randolph had chosen as a command post. Secure enough beneath his robes, he had watched the enemy gather. He had lingered till the last safe moment, and beyond—gleaning what facts he could from the welter of drunken bravado that ruled the Klansmen's camp.

"You had no right to take such risks," said the Judge.

"Exception, your honor. Risks of this sort are well worth taking if they bring results. At least we know the odds against us."

"You haven't mentioned them so far."

"Randolph has over two hundred men in that clearing. When they hit us, they'll hit hard—and they've no choice but to fight today. Randolph will be the laughingstock of Wilmington if he puts off a decision any longer. Already he's been called a coward—in both camps."

"Do they know they outnumber us?" asked Hoyt.

"I'm afraid there was no help for that; too many eyes have watched us dig in here. They don't know how many are bushwhackers—and how many neighbors. I think they're counting heavily on a surrender—without too much bloodshed."

"What are his terms?"

"Outright sale to Peabody—and banishment from the state. He still means to burn your cotton—or what's left of it. And they'd hold a kangaroo court and have a few neck-stretchings, just for the sake of form."

"Mine, I suppose?" asked Hoyt wryly.

"And mine, as a matter of course," said Julian. "We should both feel honored."

"Randolph might still let you go free if you surrender now," said the Judge. "It's worth exploring that chance, Julian."

Julian looked around the circle. These were his friends, to the last man. Eager as they were to end the Klan's strangle hold, were they willing to give him this final chance?

"We must settle this question sometime, gentlemen," said Sted-

man. "Why not settle it here and now? Surely it's better than fighting again—on Stedman's Knoll or Bowen's Bluff——"

The Judge smiled: it was the wolf grin of an old campaigner spoiling for a fight. "I'm glad you said that, General. It's what we all *wanted* you to say."

"Believe me, I want this fight as badly as any of you. After we've waited so long——" Stedman let the rest go as Louis Rothschild came through the doorway, carrying a tall stack of bandages.

"Emergency dressing station, if you don't mind," said Louis. He put his surgeon's kit on the dining-room table and faced the others with a frown. "And I'm afraid you must send out a patrol for me, Julian. I've lost my only patient—a gentleman named Thatcher Randolph."

"How on earth could Thatcher——"

"He crawled over a window sill when I was shifting my surgery."

Those gathered around the table were on their feet by now, and Julian read the answer to his question in every face. Thatcher Randolph, knowing as well as any man just when the attack would come, had chosen the right moment for his exit, preferring to drag his wounded leg down the trench before the attack was joined.

"I think we'll see better from an upstairs window," said Hoyt. "There's light enough."

Julian, obeying a sudden inspiration, whispered a few words to Stedman, who nodded brisk agreement and departed in the direction of the communication trench. The others, hastening to follow Hoyt's lead up the stairway, had not noticed the exchange. Staying close on their heels, Julian glanced quickly through a chink in the shutter on the second floor and saw that their commander, following the trench at a run, had already passed his suggestion down the line of waiting riflemen.

On the top floor he found his friends grouped at a half-open window, carefully screening their heads from possible observation without. The dawn had begun to creep grayly through the trees of the park below. In that uncertain light it was still hard to believe that the lawn under his eyes was now an inevitable battlefield—or that the figure just rising from a mass of sandbags at the angle where trench and stable joined was Thatcher Randolph.

No one spoke as the Klansman hoisted himself to the lip of the

trench, teetered there for an instant on his good leg, then skipped into the shadow of a tree. Their former patient had stolen a crutch from the splint room which helped him to advance briskly enough. Thatcher was wearing a denim nightshirt thrust carelessly into the top of his fawn-colored riding breeches; a blanket, tossed over his shoulders as a protection against the chill of morning, gave him the look of a beggar in a pantomime.

The men in the trench below watched unstirring, though several rifles followed his progress from tree to tree. Stedman, Julian observed, had passed his suggestion down that patiently waiting line just in time to save Thatcher a bullet in his back. Now the Klansman had reached the edge of the drive, where he paused for an instant, with dawn mist curling about his boot tops. Now he was on the drive itself, hopping toward the gateway like a hobbled bird. Once, in his haste, he forgot his crutch and broke into a shambling run, until the evident pain of his wound caused him to pause, fit the wooden support to his armpit, and resume his slower, more comfortable gait.

"The rat and the sinking ship," said the Judge. "A parable, gentlemen. Let's hope it hasn't the usual ending."

The sun had cleared the treetops now, cutting the mist along the driveway. As Thatcher reached the gate a long pencil of light seemed to slash the air about him, outlining his hunched shoulders in a nimbus of pure gold. The watchers in the trench—and the equally intent eyes at the third-story window—saw the Klansman turn on his good toe to thumb his nose at the gateposts he had just cleared.

The gesture was not completed. A pistol barked from the dogwood thicket across the road—a businesslike bark, sharp as doom in that clear morning air. Thatcher, with a hand halfway to his nose, stared at the sound, as though he could not quite credit his senses. Then he spun crazily on one heel and crumpled where he stood, snapping the crutch as he fell and lay still.

"Shot by his fellow rats, Judge," said Paul Saunders. "*That's* a new beginning to the fable. Let's pray it has a new ending."

"It's also our call to stations," said Hoyt. "If I'm not mistaken, that shot was a signal for the attack."

They went down the stairs in a mass, hearing the crash of musketry as they ran.

vi

An hour later, wiping a smoke-blackened cheek with a sleeve that was equally soiled, Julian found time to wonder at his calm acceptance of the killer's role. It seemed that he had been pumping lead across this palmetto breastworks forever, and ducking by rote as the return volleys spanged into the palmetto breastworks. Reload and fire on order; glance back at Stedman (calm as a martinet on dress parade there in his command post) and shift with the squad to meet the new onslaught. . . . It had seemed oddly like his first maneuvers, when he had reported to his regiment outside Atlanta. This war was no less real. He had howled with his trench mates (as lustily as he had shouted on that Georgia drill ground) when another white-clad figure crumpled in the green cover ahead or thudded to earth from a sniper's perch among the live oaks of the drive. . . .

Randolph had planned his assault cleverly enough. A feint at the stable yard, to draw their fire power to Stedman's right, had been followed by a massed do-or-die rush at what had seemed the weak spot in the line—the workers' quarters to the south. But the bombproof brigadier had met his superior in his cavalry counterpart. Recognizing the ruse, Stedman had simply anchored his right flank with a dozen expert marksmen and shifted his full battalion of rifles to his left.

As the wedge of Klansmen broke cover and came keening across the garden patches, he had held his fire until the howling white phalanx seemed to hang over his rifle barrels. The blast of lead had sent the enemy reeling in the literal sense. Enfiladed by a half hundred first-class shots at point-blank range, the Klan had broken ranks with heartening speed and scuttled for their lives into the jungle that rimmed the plantation garden.

Twenty dead lay tumbled in the vegetable rows; that brilliant repulse had set the pattern for the first hour. It had been a time of quick sorties from flank to flank, of even quicker retreats under the massed barking of Stedman's watchdogs. Now, with the sun well up, the park of the estate, which spread like a carpet of green from the turnpike to the raw earth scars of the trenches, was strangely calm.

Julian could hear the enemy stirring behind the thickets on the highroad. Now and then he could catch a shouted command or the groan of a wounded man. There was nothing unnatural about that

hush; the pulse of war throbbed on in that disputed field as tangibly as though the box hedges still trembled with the din of gunfire. This was the inevitable lull after the first numbing shock of the storm. The real storm would break later, when Randolph's cutthroats had licked their wounds and pumped their rage to the boiling point.

Hoyt came down the trench on hands and knees, exuding a strong odor of rum. "Breakfast's going in the house."

"Apparently you've drunk yours, my friend."

"Each man takes nourishment in his own fashion. Besides, I've made up my mind to die today. Why should I stuff my carcass with food?"

Julian stared hard at the lawyer, but Hoyt's eyes were tranquil. He had seen that acceptance of death before, on the eve of battle—the fey knowledge that the rendezvous had come. But Hoyt's statement—made so calmly—went beyond such intangibles as these.

"Don't stop a bullet too soon. We can still use you here."

"As it happens, I'm no longer of use to myself, Julian. We both know why."

They sat without speaking for a moment side by side in the bullet-scarred palmetto redoubt. Knowing what he should say, Julian could not quite find the words. It was one thing to be burned, beyond hope of redemption, by a woman like Lucy Sprague—quite another to recover from your scars. How could he comfort Hoyt Marshall now, when he, too, had been beyond comfort so long?

"You saw us talking on the road," said Hoyt at last. "You know I can't live with her—or without her."

"When this business is over you can go away for a while."

"There's only one way I can leave Lucy. I must take her with me."

"I don't understand you, Hoyt."

"You will before the day is done," said the lawyer darkly.

"If you go on talking like a fool I'll have to arrest you."

"Only I can't be spared, Julian. After all, I'm still a dead shot in spite of my habits." Hoyt shrugged off the subject and sighted down Julian's spare rifle barrel, sending up a spurt of leaves across the park, where a Klansman had just showed a cautious head. "Twenty more of our enemies came in just now. From South Carolina, to judge by their dust. Our friends seem to prefer watching from a safe distance."

"Can you blame them too much?"

"At the moment," said Hoyt, with his eye still closed on the rifle sight, "I'm beyond praise or blame. Still, it's amusing to see that Bowen's Bluff is now covered with carriages—each with a spyglass trained on Chisholm Hundred." He reloaded the rifle expertly and turned away from the loophole. "Go have your breakfast. I was sent to relieve you."

"How d'you know so much?"

"I've been up among your chimneys with a spyglass of my own, checking your uncle's headquarters. He's holed up in a clearing a safe quarter mile across the turnpike. So help me, he has a private tent—and orderlies. Struts into the open every half-hour, puffs like a pigeon, and dives for cover if he hears a shot."

Julian found that he could laugh at the picture. "He'll have to lead the next charge. Probably he's fortifying himself——"

"I don't doubt that for a moment. And you needn't expect another major attack while the light lasts. They may outnumber us, but we can shoot straighter." Hoyt whipped up the gun again and drew a careful bead on the crown of an oak tree far down the drive. The whole trench whooped with applause as an ungainly, sheeted figure crashed to earth with the rifle crack. "See what I mean? I can still shoot, even when I'm deep in rum."

"Go back and sleep it off, Hoyt. I'll get my breakfast later."

Hoyt did not stir from the barricade. "I saved my best news till the last, Julian. Lucy just rode into Randolph's camp."

"She wouldn't dare——"

"But she has. On a white horse. With plumes in her hat and simon-pure evil in her heart."

"Could you see that, too, at a quarter mile?"

"She's come to make us a final offer, Julian. My guess is that she'll make it in person. If you'll look carefully, you'll note that our friends the Klansmen have broken out a white flag."

But Julian had already leaped to the step-up beside the lawyer as a hoarse cheer broke out along the whole length of the trench. There was no mistaking the import of that square of white thrust cautiously from the midst of a dogwood thicket. Without turning he knew that Stedman had already burst from the house, with Judge Bowen at his heels and Saunders not far behind.

"Does it look like a trick?"

"I don't think so. If you ask me, Randolph feels that he's bled enough."

Stedman lifted a cautious head above the breastworks and cupped his hands. "Come forward, whoever you are. We'll meet you halfway. Just remember, you're well covered!"

The white flag lifted higher at the invitation. There was a crash of hoofs in the thicket; a Klansman rode forward to a point just inside the Chisholm gateposts, then reined in and faced back to the safety of the position he had just quitted. Again there was a stir among the dogwood. A graceful white stallion, stepping as daintily as though this were a riding ring, wheeled from thicket to road and minced down the Chisholm driveway. Lucy Sprague, in a velvet habit, her ash-blond hair high-piled under a saucy spray of egret feathers, handled her mount as though to the manner born. The whole trench let out its breath as the handsome equestrienne crossed the park at a canter and reared back to a halt a few yards from the barricade.

"Come out, Julian! I want a word with you."

"I'm in command here, madame," said Stedman severely. "You may address your remarks to me."

Lucy took the rebuke with composure. "It's Dr. Chisholm's property that's threatened, General," she said. "As well as Dr. Chisholm's life. Unless he surrenders at once, I can't answer for either." She gentled the horse and rode even closer to the palmetto wall. "There's been enough blood spilled—to no purpose. Why spill more?"

"General Randolph can stand a little bloodletting," said Stedman cheerfully. "You might tell him that our losses have been light so far and our supply of ammunition unlimited." Julian, waiting tensely beside Stedman on the fire step, marveled at his coolness. They both knew that Louis had worked all morning to save the worst of their wounded—and that a dozen of their own dead lay behind the barricade.

"General Randolph is well aware of your position," said Lucy calmly. "He's giving you the choice—surrender or annihilation."

"Why doesn't the general deliver his ultimatum in person, Mrs. Sprague? Is he afraid to look me in the eye?"

"For the last time, may I speak to Julian?"

Stedman glanced down at Julian, who had yet to show his face above the parapet. "What shall I say to the lady?"

"Say we got beyond words long ago. We can only talk with lead now."

Hoyt Marshall spoke hoarsely at his elbow. "*I'll* tell her, Julian——"

"Keep your head down, you fool!"

But the lawyer had vaulted the parapet with his words; only Julian had seen the handle of the slender dueling pistol thrust deep in his shirt front. A hundred eyes watched intently—from the trench and the Klan's own foothold in the park—as he walked easily across the lawn and offered Lucy Sprague the most courtly of bows.

"I've our commander's permission to desert to the enemy, Lucy. May I ride with you to General Randolph?"

Stedman opened his mouth to shout, and swallowed his protest as Julian's fingers bit into his arm. They both watched, wide-eyed, as Hoyt seized the pommel of Lucy's saddle and leaped up behind her. Even at that distance Julian could see her face freeze as she divined the lawyer's purpose a second too late. Hoyt's arm was around her now; he spun her in the saddle to kiss her full on the mouth—just as her lips opened wide to scream.

The stallion reared, just once, then quieted as the lawyer's fist twined in the reins. The watchers on both sides of the park, puzzled at the pantomime, saw man and woman join in a close embrace on the horse's back, watched the animal break into a trot and turn in a long arc, from trench to driveway and back again. The pistol's bark, when it came, was muted between those two close-joined bodies. Only Julian, watching from the fire step, understood why Lucy's body had slumped there in the lawyer's arms.

Thanks to Hoyt's iron grip, she still rode gracefully as they swept back toward the trench. It was only when he dropped to the lawn that the watchers saw the wide stain of red on the lace at her breast. Rolling in the saddle like a broken doll, Lucy all but tumbled to the ground as Hoyt released her. Then, as the watchers held their breath in shocked disbelief, Hoyt seized her lifeless body by the scruff and tossed her face down across her saddle. Held by one twisted foot in a stirrup, her hair trailing wildly, Lucy seemed more than ever doll-like in death as the lawyer slapped her horse into a run.

Even now the hostile lines watched in silence as the tall white stal-

lion galloped back to Randolph's camp with its inert burden. It was Hoyt himself who broke the trance with a roar of crazy laughter.

"See what I meant, Julian? I said I'd take her with me!"

The whole trench was shouting now, but Hoyt ignored his friends' voices as he faced the enemy line. Step by step, and proud as any duelist, he walked toward the rifles of the Klan, letting the bullets spat about him unheeded.

Twice he staggered and almost fell. When he dropped at last, he went down with his grace intact, in the shadow of the live oaks along the drive, a scant foot from the sharpshooter he had killed.

vii

They had expected the attack at dusk—the attack that could not fail now that the Klan had pinned down their position and measured their forces in that series of probing feints. In the late afternoon, as the light began to fade, there had been a short, vicious onslaught, delivered under protective fire in the pasture beyond the stables; and though Stedman had poured as much lead into his reply as he could spare, at least a score of Klansmen were now anchored in the tool shed behind the stable itself—an ugly threat to their whole line of trenches, and a deadly menace should Randolph attempt to storm the house from all sides. Now, as night settled in earnest, there was no further threat from the enemy, though Julian and Stedman, crouched in an angle of the trench not a hundred feet from the highroad, could hear stirrings in the thickets and the whisper of commands that told their own ominous story.

"Can we stand in this line, General?"

"It's too great a risk in the dark. We must fall back on the house and do our best to hold till morning."

"What if they break that line too?"

"Then we blow up the stair well and fight from upstairs."

"They'll fire the house—you know that." Julian put a hand on the old cavalry commander's arm. "You can still go quietly, General—and no questions asked. I'll hold that last line with my bushwhackers. It isn't fair to expose you to——"

"I'm in this to the finish, Julian." Stedman seemed about to say

more. Instead he slid down quietly from the parapet and moved down the communication trench on tiptoe, motioning for Julian to follow.

In the main trench the fire steps had already been abandoned, save for a light holding force. Above them, the windows of the house seemed to bristle with steel as new rifle barrels appeared at every chink in the shutters. Julian saw that a series of bonfires had been laid along the fringes of the lawn under the protection of the rifles. Should the Klan elect to rush the house in a frontal assault, they would give the defenders ample light to shoot by.

"Aren't you afraid they'll use that lightwood against us?"

"They'll come with torches of their own," said Stedman. "It's too late to worry over fire, Julian. Our only hope is to make this a bath of blood for your uncle Clayton. My guess is we've killed close to thirty of them today. If we can knock down a half hundred more in this first assault, I'd say the fight was ours. If we miss our aim and let them indoors——" He did not finish the sentence as they entered the cellar by the grade doors.

Candles, ready to be snuffed instantly when the attack began, lighted their way from hall to dining room. Here the Judge sat over a basin of stew, which he devoured with small show of manners. Stedman took his place at the table, giving final orders as he ate. No mention was made of the fact that Hoyt's face was missing from that final council of war. Julian found that he could fall to with the others, while he held the thought of Hoyt's ghastly sacrifice at arm's length.

"We should put fifty rifles on the roof."

"We can't spare more than twenty."

"Surely we haven't lost that many?" Julian had asked the question without pausing over its import. Now he read his answer in the downcast eyes around the table. "Does that mean that some of our friends have had enough?"

"Perhaps ten men deserted when it was dark enough to slip away," said the Judge.

"I'd make it a dozen," said Stedman. "Counting Julian's doctor friend."

"Don't tell me *Louis* has deserted?"

"I'm afraid he was the first to go."

"But he wouldn't leave the surgery—he couldn't." Julian felt his

voice crack under the shock of that revelation. Even if Louis was afraid of death—and Julian could not accept that for a moment—he would never desert his table under fire.

"Saunders is a doctor of sorts," said Stedman. "He's manned the surgery as best he could. You might see how they're making out—but come back at once. Time is running short—and I'll need you behind a rifle too."

A glance was enough to tell Julian that Louis had left the compact plantation hospital in order. There were only a few wounded so far—the Klansmen, too, had shot straight enough when they had found a target. The two surgical mates, veterans of long campaigning who had refused to yield to the mass hysteria of the other Negroes, were working tranquilly in the dispensary, preparing splints and dressings for the ordeal ahead; Saunders, moving easily from bed to bed, seemed as much at home as any intern.

Situated as they were a little apart from the main buildings of the estate, the surgery and hospital would surely be spared, even if the Klan scored a complete victory. Julian wondered once again why Louis had deserted in this hour of crisis. . . . And then he remembered that the Klan had sent its own special warning to the Jewish doctor too. He could hardly blame his old friend for beating a retreat at the last possible moment.

"Stay awhile, Julian," said Saunders. "Not that there's much to be done as of now. Your two helpers can manage things perfectly without us."

Julian glanced at the busy Negroes and took a tentative step toward the dispensary. "This is one part of Chisholm Hundred that makes sense, in any weather," he said. He would have given a great deal to take Louis's place tonight—to devote himself to healing rather than to death. At the same moment he knew that he had no right to question Louis's assistants about his departure. Skilled as the two Negroes were, they would handle the cases adequately—while he fought his last-ditch fight for his home and life itself.

"You, at least, can stay here, Paul," he said. "After all, you're a noncombatant—and these boys will need help."

"Stedman needs our help more," said the journalist, and cocked an ear toward the surgery door as he spoke. "If I'm not mistaken, he'll be needing us now."

They moved in unison to the safety of the darkness, crouching behind a hedge to count the rifle cracks. Even from that distance it was evident that the attackers, sure of their purpose at last, were moving in on the main house from all sides and firing as they came.

"Stay where you are, Paul. This isn't your fight now."

"That's where you're mistaken. Win or lose, it's too good a show to miss."

"Only if you insist, then. Keep your head down and follow me; there's a short cut behind the blacksmith's shop."

The whole west face of the house seemed bathed in flame as they approached; Julian saw that Lafe had risked everything to light his bonfires in this final effort to keep the enemy outside the walls. Stedman was expending his ammunition in volleys now—timed accurately to meet and repel each rush of white-clad figures. So far the Klan had not moved much beyond the line of trenches; and these, since the breastworks faced outward, made but poor defensive cover. But there was a dogged, hammering persistence about this attack that could not be long denied. Starred here and there by a boldly flung torch, the blurred line of the enemy seemed like a noose, drawn ever tighter about the house and outbuildings, ready to choke them one by one.

When they gained the main house at last and scurried up the back stairway to the bedroom floor, Julian and Paul were both bathed in cold sweat and panting far more than the exertion warranted. Here, with a stack of loaded rifles beside them and a breastwork of mattresses between them and the din outside, it seemed almost calm. Here, at least, one could sense that each shot had found its mark in those weaving white lines that darted toward the circle of firelight and recoiled under the crash of gunfire.

There was a long lull while the Klansmen clung to their cover, waiting for Lafe's bonfires to dwindle. When the roar of the new attack began it seemed to focus on their right flank, around the stable yard. Then, as the gunfire mounted to an ominous crescendo, they heard a newer and even more frightening sound—the crash of gun butts on wood, mingled with the tinkle of falling glass. A whisper from the hall only confirmed their fears.

"They're in the east wing, General."

"How many?"

"A dozen. Filtered in from that tool shed behind the stable. We

stopped the rest—outside. There'll be more, now we can't see to shoot."

Julian spoke out of the silence. "Burn them out, if it'll help. We can stop the fire at the breezeway."

"Can't any more, Doctor. They're on the breezeway too—and they've emptied our last fire bucket."

This was stunning news. With their water barrels well placed along the porch that connected the main house with its guest wing, Julian had hoped to control any stray fires the Klan might set in that quarter. Now that the enemy himself was in possession of the wing—and fighting his way toward the main house itself—he knew that the whole estate could be fired almost at will.

"We'll have to blast them out," said Stedman. "Will you take twenty men, Judge, and do what you can? We'll hold here with the balance—or try."

"Shall we blow up the main stairway?"

"We haven't come to that yet. Give the rats all you have. Remember, you'll be shooting from above—if you hurry."

Ten minutes later the din from the east wing had built to a climax —then stilled as abruptly as though a steel door had slammed on enemy and defender alike. Julian and Stedman exchanged glances as they turned from their respective windows to reload.

"Does that mean they've pulled out?"

"If they have, it's only to try another way. The portico, perhaps—if they'd risk it."

"Or the back stairway——" Julian was gone, with the sentence unfinished. He had just remembered that the ground-floor breezeway and the servants' stairway joined at an angle beside the house proper. An angle that would be impossible to defend, once an enemy had gained a foothold in that part of the estate.

Running down the upstairs hall, he saw at once that the Judge and his force had acquitted themselves brilliantly. Shooting from above through the fanlights of the main stair well, they had swept the grounds about the east wing clear of enemies; already they were moving in force to reoccupy the east wing itself, from which sporadic gunfire still spouted.

Julian paused on the landing of the servants' stairway and listened intently for a sound below. There was a vague rustle that might mean

anything. Then from the roadway outside he heard another noise that struck his brain like a hammer blow—the massed hoofbeats of a group of horsemen riding in a fast, tight formation, moving recklessly toward the house and the crescendo of war.

Reinforcements for the Klan! Randolph, it seemed, had outguessed them after all. Fighting a dogged, all-day siege, he had smashed through at the best possible moment, knowing that he would receive help with victory already in his grasp, making that victory a certainty.

As though to answer his despair, he heard a gun butt smash a lock below. In that burst of sound the whole downstairs region seemed to fill with white-robed men, their mouths open on the victory shout, their torches raised in triumph. He fired twice from the stairhead, dropping two of the vanguard as he dived for what cover the newel post afforded. A bullet raked at his sleeve as he rammed a fresh charge home. Before he could adjust the priming he saw a familiar figure detach itself from the group and come charging up the stairs, one gloved fist tearing at the mask that shrouded him. Clayton Randolph, he thought, would never venture this close to action—unless that action was all but ended. The hoofbeats were louder now, seeming to ring the house—along with the maddening roar of rifle fire.

He saw his uncle turn as the mask came free at last and Randolph's little pig eyes, maniacal with hate in the dance of the torches, found out his hiding place. Careless of consequences, Julian threw his useless pistol aside and charged down the stairs, with both hands itching for the Cyclops' throat. Randolph cringed for an instant despite the army revolver in each fist. Then, with a smile on his pouting lips, he squared away on the stair and raised both pistols—waiting, even now, for his nephew to come into point-blank range before he risked a shot.

Julian heard the guns roar as one and staggered under the impact. But a strange thing had happened on the stair below: the bullets had thudded into his uncle's body, not his own; it was his uncle's eyes that glazed with the sudden sight of death. Incredulously he passed his fingers over his chest, feeling for blood.

In that flash he knew that it was rifle fire from *without*, through the smashed doorway, that had found the fat cat's hide.

Randolph went down in a heap on the stair, and Julian leaped over

the tumbled body without a second glance, to club his way into the melee below. He knew now that the Klansmen had smashed into the house to avoid some peril without, that the bullets that had found their leader were part of that strange deliverance.

The next few minutes passed in a red haze. Much later he knew that he had gone berserk—snatching a gun from a dead hand to flail about him, smashing at hooded skulls with all the abandon of a savage in some jungle clearing. He knew, even later, that Stedman and the rest had surged downstairs in his wake, to club the last invader into submission, even as the others, led by the Judge and Saunders, had roared down the front stairway to blast the enemy from the portico. Then it was over—as miraculously as it had begun—and he was staring into the whiskered face of Amos Martin, serene as ever behind his long-barreled rifle.

"Looks like we made it after all, Doc," said Amos, and his voice matched his manner.

"How did you——"

"You can thank your friend Rothschild for that. He knew just where to find us."

So Louis had not deserted after all. Even in that dazed moment Julian could be grateful for the discovery.

"Louis knew—and I didn't?"

"Does it matter now? We got in here in time, didn't we?" The bushwhacker laid a soothing hand on Julian's shoulder. "No you don't, Doc. Stay close to me. Let Lafe and the others do the huntin' —they've had more practice."

Julian drew in a great sobbing breath and clung with both arms to a pillar on the portico. (Somehow, he knew, he had burst into the open air, though his mind was still anchored to that back hall and the murder glow in Clayton Randolph's eyes.) The whole estate seemed to echo with rebel keening, the crack of gunfire, the bellows of wounded men.

Here and there he could hear the shouts of the bushwhackers as they flushed yet another Klansman from cover, the crash of pistol or gun butt drowning the last howl for mercy. Cut to ribbons by that unexpected charge, shot through the back as they swarmed in on the house, the Klansmen had been smashed in a matter of minutes, the whole Den all but annihilated. That much Julian grasped even now

as he clung to the pillar, feeling the first wave of nausea pass as his nerves steadied.

Amos completed the picture with that same easy calm. "Rothschild had orders to report, Doc. We been waitin' for months to pin the skunks down—just like we did tonight. Thanks for the chance——"

"Where is she, Amos? Did she lead this rescue party?"

"She knew better."

"Where is she?"

"On Gator Island," said Amos. "Where did you think? If you've got your breath, I'll take you to her now."

"We can't go fast enough."

"You can say that twice, Doc. She's reached her time."

viii

The icy water stung him into awareness of self. He knew that he would have no clear memory of that ride from Chisholm Hundred to the swamp road—of the first plunge of their horses into the channel that separated the riverbank from the island. Perhaps it was better so—that he should come this far with no sense of transition, that his mind should waken to externals again when only a flooded river bottom separated him from Jane.

He heard Amos curse the horses for their refusal to venture further in that icy torrent. Then he forgot Amos in his own struggle to breast the drag of the stream—swollen now with the autumn rains, and running strong for the open estuary and the sea. Already he had remembered the futility of fighting a current such as this. The small instrument case he carried hampered his movements, and he thrust it inside his shirt, buttoning it securely against his chest. Then he put both arms to the task of quartering the current, letting it do its part in bearing him toward the island bank.

Torches lighted his way now; a dozen willing hands lifted him from the water and rushed him through the dunes. He heard Louis shout his name at a distance and stumbled toward the sound. His friend stood in a clearing at the water's edge, with the torches of Jane's own personal guard bobbing all about. Only when he had stumbled into that circle of familiar faces did he sense the reason for the canoe on

the bank and recognize the fur-swathed figure that lay beneath the thwarts.

"You made it, Julian. I knew you would."

"How is she?"

"Tell me first. Is Chisholm Hundred safe?"

"As safe as it'll ever be. *How is she?*"

"See for yourself," said Louis, and stepped back from the gunwale of the canoe.

Deep in that nest of furs, Jane seemed absurdly small and pitifully lonely. He lifted a cold hand and kissed it, hardly aware of the action, beside himself with the fear that had driven him on that final lap of their reunion. Even before he parted the robes he could see that her body was swollen with her pregnancy—with the strong son she had carried for his sake. . . . He laughed aloud at his conceit even as he fought down his fear. Any midwife would have said that Jane's body was at term. And yet his swift-moving brain had already reminded him that Jane's labor had come at least a month too soon.

"She's in deep narcosis," said Louis. "The pains were racking her when I arrived. It seemed best to—put her to sleep for a while."

"Are they coming regularly?"

"They've slackened for the moment," said Louis. "I don't doubt they'll return."

"You should have brought her straight to the surgery."

"I meant to, Julian—the moment it was safe."

"We can risk it now, I think." Julian was already in the canoe, with his wife's inert head cradled in his lap. Louis picked up a paddle and settled in the stern. Eager hands sent them spinning into the push of the current, with a cheer to speed their progress.

"Tell it from the beginning, Louis. She should be close to a month from term."

Louis Rothschild nodded—and just escaped smiling. "You needn't instruct me there, my friend. I've been the Chisholm family doctor—ever since the mother first summoned me."

"Isn't this rather late to admit it?"

"She sent for me first in the spring, when she was camped in the woods above Fayetteville. She insisted on riding with Amos till—I forbade her."

"I can believe that, Louis."

"Most of the time thereafter she was living in a cabin near Charleston. She was still there when she sent Lafe his reinforcements." Louis hesitated, then went on with that same faint smile: "As I say, I've been visiting her there regularly, as a good family doctor should."

"No wonder you've been taking so many short vacations lately!"

Louis continued, unperturbed: "I knew she'd be on the island when the attack began. Of course that was something you could never hear about. She'd planned to rejoin you—when it was over. That's why she sent the note."

"Did she know how things were going today?"

"We kept the worst from her, of course. Until I slipped away and gave Amos his signal to strike. That's when it all began—the excitement was too much for her. I'm sure it brought on the hemorrhage——"

"*Hemorrhage?*"

"There's been only a little so far."

"If there's a separation of the placenta——"

"You're too good a surgeon to make such guesses," said Louis. "Wait till we can get her on the table." But his iron calm, which had cheered Julian so greatly a moment ago, seemed counterfeit now. Both of them knew too well what they would find when they had brought Jane home again. In a normal pregnancy the growing child received its nourishment from the mother's body via the placenta, until the last moment before actual labor. Bleeding in the uterine cavity during the last month of parturition not only endangered the mother's life; it could gradually decrease the child's own blood supply as the placenta detached from the wall of the uterus itself.

"Can't you paddle faster, Louis?"

"We'll be there in another moment, with this tide behind us."

Julian's fingers sought his wife's pulse. It was rapid but still strong. However, he had seen such cases before and had watched the patient collapse abruptly, though the pulse beat had seemed normal to the last.

His hand moved beneath the fur robes, testing the muscle tone above the mound of the distended uterus. A spasmodic contraction built beneath the pressure and hardened to a tight knot. Jane moaned fitfully under the opiate.

"For God's sake, Louis, lean on that paddle!"

"Here's the landing now. Keep under the gunwale; they're still trading shots along the bank."

A bullet sang over their heads as Louis spoke, and they heard Lafe's voice roar out a challenge. The roar changed to a shout of welcome as the bushwhacker recognized the canoe and rushed into the shallows to help guide it to the landing. Stedman was close behind. The former cavalry commander was almost dancing for joy as he wrung Julian's hand and turned him toward the big house on the hill.

Lights were already beginning to wink on downstairs; here and there a stray bushwhacker moved to stamp out a still flaring torch. In the woods across the turnpike there was spasmodic rifle fire—the only real reminder that a fight to the death had just swept over this well-guarded land.

"We smashed 'em, Julian! My God, how we *smashed* 'em!"

Stedman had put the case into a single word. The defeat of the Klansmen was final. Never again would the power of those hooded bands be felt in the Cape Fear basin. Lucy was dead; Clayton Randolph was dead. So were those twin warlocks, the Cokers, and that artist among back-stabbers, Thatcher Randolph. With its leadership safe in hell, the local Den would have small chance of revival.

Julian wrung Stedman's hand in turn. "Someday, General, I'll thank you as you deserve. We'd never have held without you."

"I did no more than my duty, Julian. Believe me, I'd have fought this battle on my own land, gladly. And it was your wife's men who turned the trick. We all know what we owe her now——"

Something in Julian's face made Stedman break off short. He turned back to the landing, where Lafe and Louis were transferring Jane's limp form to a stretcher. "Don't tell me she's been hurt?"

"Pregnant's the word, General. I'm still praying we've brought her home in time."

In the hospital he took what satisfaction he could in helping the others transfer Jane to a clean white bed in the isolation room. When Louis had left him alone with her he repeated his first examination, as thoroughly as circumstances permitted.

Again the muscles above the uterus tightened under the slightest pressure of his fingers. Listening for the child's heartbeat, he heard nothing for a time and felt his own heart contract. It was, of course, quite possible that hemorrhage had caused the baby's death long ago.

Then he shifted his ear and felt the beat come through the distended tissue—too fast to reassure him, but strong enough.

Louis's first diagnosis, he saw, had been both clever and accurate. A verdict of placental hemorrhage was now inevitable—a dilemma that only surgery could relieve.

When he opened the door of the isolation room, Louis came in quietly without being asked. "I hope I was wrong, Julian."

"Unfortunately, you were completely right."

They faced each other across the bed for a silent moment, disturbed only by Jane's uneasy breathing, the occasional low moans that broke through her drugged stupor. The picture was complete now: a steady bleeding beneath the mass of the placenta, internal, all but unseen. Thanks to Louis's competent technique, it had been discovered in time. But Louis, for all his skill, was hardly equipped to perform the operation that would save Jane's life. And unless that surgery was prompt and sure, both mother and child would die—the former from steady loss of blood, the latter from asphyxiation as ruthless as though a cord were knotted about the tiny neck.

"If you'll set up for a Caesarean section, Louis——"

"I already have, Julian. Can you do it?"

"I've got to do it. It's her only chance. Hers and the child's."

ix

A half-hour later, lifting his hands from the basin, he closed his eyes in a brief prayer. All around him he could feel the surgery bustle into the finale of its preparations. He knew without opening his eyes that every precaution had been taken to assure the success of his gamble against time.

Tonight, more than ever, he could thank God for the cleanliness that he and Louis had insisted on here. The pungent smell of chlorine filled the air: everything, from instruments to linen pads, had been soaked in the chemical. Here, at least, the threat of peritonitis had been reduced to a minimum—to say nothing of the other dread fevers that still followed Caesarean sections in every hospital abroad, save in the clinics of Semmelweis and Lister.

A disciple of both these pioneers, Julian had no doubt of the

efficacy of his methods. What of his belief in his own power, when Jane's life and that of their unborn child depended upon the skill of his hands, his sureness with the scalpel? It was a question he had forced from his mind while Louis prepared her. It clamored for an answer now.

"Patient ready, Doctor."

His lips framed the last words of his prayer. Then he faced the operating table and stepped into the hard circle of light that ringed it.

Louis already stood at the head of the table with a cone of cotton soaked in chloroform. For a moment Julian stared stupidly at the twisted figure beneath the sheet, wondering if this could be Jane. It was his last chance for personal recognition. When he picked up the knife, the body beneath his hands would be another patient, nothing more.

"Is that you, Julian?"

He felt the tears start to his eyes as he bent above the table. It was Jane's voice—twisted, like her body, by the pain that had forced its way through the narcotic. A frail, far-off voice that already seemed to belong in the other world . . . Holding his chlorine-soaked hands aside, he bent to kiss her cold lips, to whisper her name.

"Will I—be all right, Julian?" The words were spaced far apart; he knew that each had cost her an effort.

"Of course you will. Louis and I are seeing to that right now."

"I—wouldn't be here—if you hadn't won. I—know that much."

"Don't talk, please. The fighting's over. Your pain will soon be over too."

"I—know the danger, Julian."

"You aren't in danger."

"But I am. I know I am. You needn't pretend. Promise me—if you have to choose . . ." Her voice died, and he drew back a little, sure that she had fainted. But Jane went on, in the barest of whispers: "Save him if you can, Julian. Don't think of me——"

"So you're sure it's a boy?"

"Of course it's a boy. I—felt him kick. Promise?"

"Shouldn't you leave this to me, darling?"

"I—wouldn't mind dying, Julian. If I could—give you a son. . . ." She went out in earnest then. He nodded to Louis, who came forward with the anesthetic.

"I'll administer the chloroform, Louis. Will you prepare the operative field?"

The other doctor relinquished his place with a wordless nod. Both of them understood Julian's reluctance to touch the patient now. Both knew that he must conquer that aversion in a matter of moments.

Louis worked swiftly, scrubbing the skin above the hard mound of the uterus in ever-widening circles, wiping the skin clean with a dry linen square before he repeated the process. Towels soaked in chlorine were then placed above the operative area, forming a rectangle just below the umbilicus. Jane was in deep anesthesia when Louis stepped back, picked up a linen pad in a forceps, and offered Julian his place with a small ceremonial bow.

"It's now or never, my friend."

"Scalpel, please."

The knife slapped into his palm, and he knew that his hand was as cold as the steel—and trembling too violently to control. For an instant he steadied himself at the table's edge while he fought down the sick fear that threatened to master him. This, of course, was the cowering point that all surgeons must surmount—the moment when knife first meets flesh. This was the time to banish all uncertainty, to rely without question on one's hands and brain. Tonight he could only close his eyes and pray once more, while he felt the cold certainty of defeat invade his heart.

He heard Louis step forward and knew that his friend had drawn back at once. His was a battle no man could fight for another. When he opened his eyes, the trembling had ceased, though it took all his will power to force his fingers to pick up a linen pledget, to press hard at the spot where the incision must begin.

And then, magically, a force outside himself took over, to steady both hand and brain. A core of hard-won skill closed about the operating table, shutting out the world and all its warring voices. From this point nothing would have reality but that rectangle of white flesh beneath the knife. Julian Chisholm was only an onlooker, watching from afar as hands and scalpel went about their business.

"There should be little bleeding here. The pressure of the uterus cuts down venous bleeding."

It was his own voice, right enough, though the accent was strangely

impersonal. With no surprise he saw that the scalpel had already slashed downward, to expose the glistening muscle sheath. This, too, was slashed in turn; the blunt handle of the scalpel followed the length of the wound, separating the fibers and exposing the pinkish sheath of the peritoneum—strained to the bursting point by the distended womb just beneath.

Moving in unison, the forceps of surgeon and assistant tented the peritoneum expertly. The scalpel, nicking and turning to nick again, opened the abdominal sheath cautiously, avoiding the uterus itself, which emerged instantly into the operative field, swollen grotesquely by its burden.

"Heavy pads ready, Doctor."

"Thank you, Louis. We'll have some real bleeding now. Be sure you've enough sutures threaded."

Louis nodded soberly; he had already come forward with a heavy linen pad held ready between his fingers. Both of them knew that the next knife stroke might well be decisive.

The surgeon made it cleanly, opening perhaps six inches of the uterine wall, then stroking the fibrous tissue again and again with the blade, until a thin-walled bag of fluid bulged into the opening. Blood poured instantly from the wound and continued to pour; Louis controlled the flow as best he could with a series of folded pads. There was no time to go in with clamps at this stage, and no real point of contact, since those metal stoppers would have torn through the soft muscle layers as quickly as they were applied.

Julian slit the water-filled bag with great care and continued his penetration as its contents geysered from the incision and poured in a yellowish flood across Louis's inadequate linen dam. Slipping two fingers into the opening he had made, he lifted the bag and slit again. Now he was well inside the uterus itself; his fingers closed on a tiny foot, reached deeper to enclose another. With the Caesarean section opened, it was easy to outline the form of the infant curled tightly within its mother's womb. Easier still to detach that small, compact body, to lift it through the incision.

"Clamp the cord—quickly!"

Louis had already moved to answer the command. From a corner of his eye Julian saw the metal clamps bite down on the gelatinous umbilical cord that still joined child and placenta. A quick slash of

the scalpel between the clamps was all that was needed to separate baby and mother.

"Get it breathing. I'll do the rest."

He knew that Louis was still watching him intently even as he lifted the baby by its feet, with the clamp still swinging grotesquely from the stump of umbilical cord. But there was no time to follow the other doctor's movements now—with the placenta and its all-but-fatal separation still within the cavity. Seizing the deeply incised uterus, holding it wide open as one might manipulate a sack, Julian slipped his hand deep inside—this time between the sac that had held the baby and the inside wall of the muscular organ itself.

Blood, both dark and fresh, gushed between his fingers as he entered the pool which had formed between the placenta and the uterine wall, but his hand moved on, unheeding. Now he had delivered the placenta itself, along with its trailing membranes. And now, with that hazard behind him, he could use both hands to massage the now flabby, collapsed muscles of the uterus itself, to encourage its contraction.

His breath caught when he felt the muscular organ respond almost instantly. Inert but a moment ago, seemingly exhausted by its long-term burden, the uterus now tensed and hardened beneath his fingers, forcing the last drop of placental blood through the wound, closing further flow to a mere trickle. Still holding the organ steady with his free hand, and still kneading the muscles to continue that life-giving contraction, he could work swiftly now. Suture needles thrust across the wound in crisscross stitches, pulling the pouting edges snug—until the last bleeder in the muscle structure itself was under complete control.

At the side table behind him he heard the resounding smack of palm on flesh—and a wail that pierced the heart with a happiness deeper than love. Now, at last, he could risk a glance at the child still swinging by its heels in Louis's competent fist, and howling lustily at its first contact with the world.

"Your son and heir, Doctor. Listen to him howl! Is the uterus contracting?"

"See for yourself, Louis. I'll take the boy, if I may."

Louis tossed the newest Chisholm between his father's hands with

a casual gesture that tried, and failed, to cover the moisture in his eyes. "May I tie off your sutures, Doctor?"

"You may indeed. Please observe that those muscles are hard as a rock."

But he did not need Louis's sigh of relief to confirm his own judgment. Now that the uterus had clamped of its own accord on the void left by the placenta, there was no danger of hemorrhage and no fear that the incision would not heal with time, leaving the organ as normal as before.

He paused for an instant, with the child still cradled in his arm, to test Jane's pulse. It was strong and regular—a bit faster than normal, but certainly not dangerously so after an ordeal such as this.

"You've saved them, Julian—you've saved them both."

Louis repeated the words in a kind of happy singsong as he began the task of closing the wound. His voice followed the surgeon as he bore the child away.

X

With facile hands Julian tied off the stump of the umbilical cord. His fingers reveled at the contact with the child's pink skin, the strong belling of the chest as the baby continued to draw his first breath and howled in bewilderment at the strangeness of life. When this was done he carried the boy to the room where Jane would waken and placed him in a basket near the bed. She would find him there when her eyes opened after the anesthesia.

He did not stir for a long time—not even when Louis and the others had brought his wife to the bed and made her comfortable among the high-piled pillows. Staring at his son in the wicker crib, at the woman he loved, he could not quite believe that they had come home to him at last—precisely as Jane had promised. He bent to kiss her softly, and then the boy, as though the contact of his lips would convince him that they were real indeed. Real as all their shared tomorrows would be in a land he had fought to make safe and bountiful.

What more could a man want than this—except a free country where his sons could make their own lives? And that, praise God, would come with time. The new South would rise from its own ashes

—rise and stand firm, because the stubborn heart of its people would not let it be destroyed.

Beyond the windows of the surgery the cool fingers of the dawn unlocked another day. Chisholm Hundred and its master watched the sunrise, knowing that they could face tomorrow unafraid.